



I

Imitatio and Renovatio

A dispute also arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, "[...] For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table?"

Luke 22 : 24-27

He is a poor disciple who does not excel his master.
Leonardo da Vinci¹

THE RENAISSANCE BEGAN WITH A COMPETITION. But, one may ask, what is the Renaissance? And which competition? The quickest answer to the first vast question is found in the conception, or ideal, of *renovatio*: the revival of classical letters – in a word, Humanism – followed thereafter by the visual arts. As Thomas Greene has brilliantly shown, *imitatio* is central and pervasive in Italian Renaissance culture.² The same can be argued for rivalry. Perhaps rivalry is inherent in *imitatio*; certainly *imitatio* is inherent in rivalry. Once poetry and the ancient works it may describe are taken as models to be imitated, they become challenges to be surpassed.

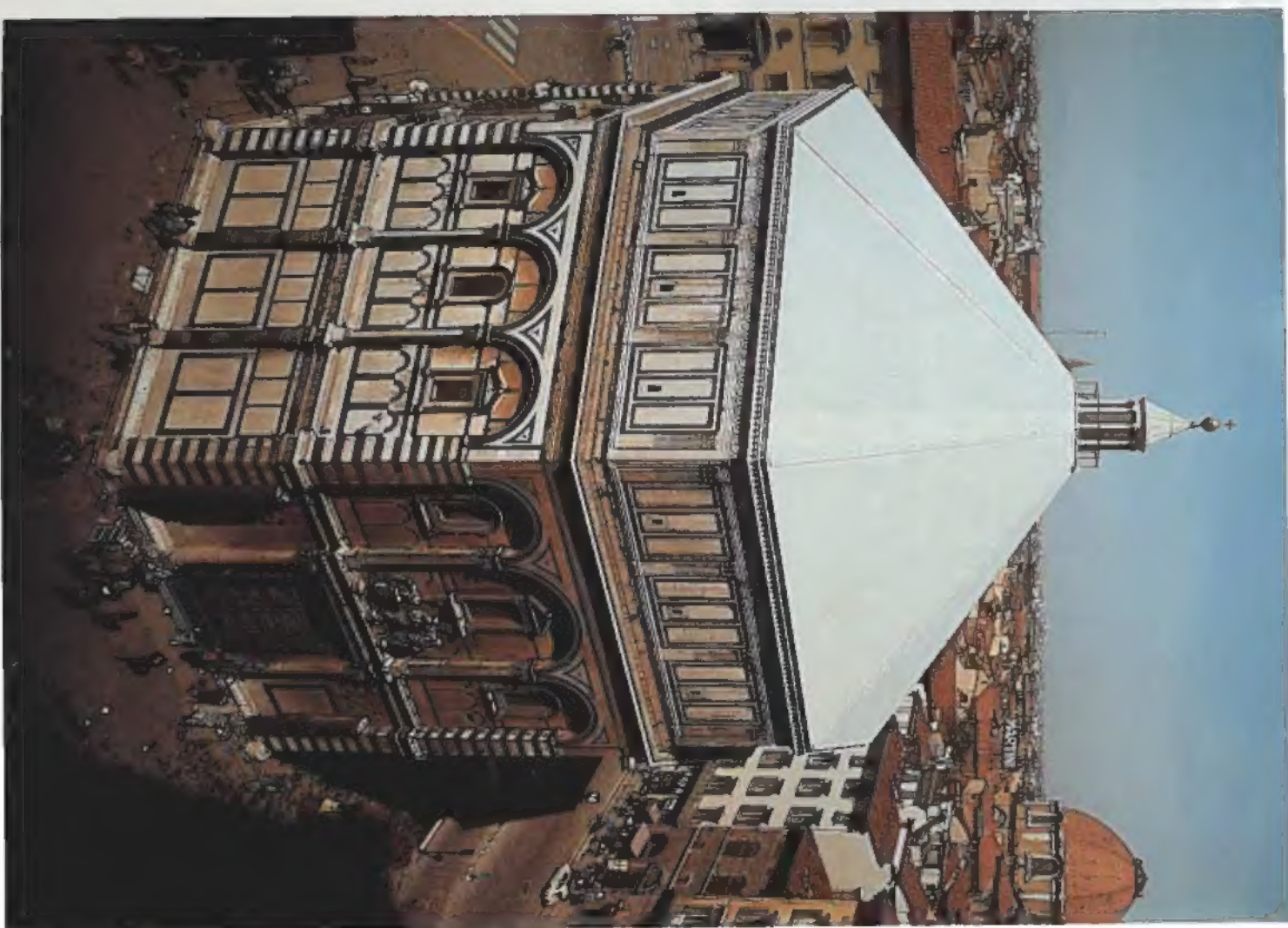
The Renaissance revival of antiquity is bound to the classical (and unChristian) agon, an opposition or confrontation to surpass one's rival. At once psychological and cultural, the Renaissance agon is as central to the period as the revival of Ciceronian Latin and classical conceptions of beauty and proportion. And central to the Renaissance agon is Michelangelo, the great protagonist of his time. Giorgio Vasari expressed the idea in a nutshell: "Force yourself to imitate Michelangelo in everything."³ Everyone else might be perceived – and was perceived by Michelangelo – either as his antagonist or as his acolyte. For everyone else, he was *the* referent. Even Lodovico Dolce, one of Titian's greatest champions, described Leonardo, Raphael, and Titian himself as Michelangelo's rivals.⁴ For Michelangelo himself, the only acknowledged points of reference were nature and classical antiquity.

The intention to surpass one's rivals, past and present, distinguishes the Renaissance from earlier periods of rebirth. In his seminal book on the subject, Erwin Panofsky argued that the fundamental distinction between

"Renaissance" and "renascences" was that only in the fifteenth century did the ancient gods reassume their original appearance: Christ may continue to resemble Apollo, but now Apollo himself reappears as himself, with his ancient attributes and his classical demeanor.⁵ Panofsky's observation, though incontrovertible, is incomplete. The Renaissance revival of antiquity is concerned not only with archaeological awareness – in itself, a conscious and self-conscious concern – but also, perhaps subconsciously, with psychological emulation. Earlier generations may have imitated ancient motifs, but now artists and authors announced the intention to transcend them. "In Renaissance rhetorical and educational theory," as Wayne Rebhorn explains, "emulation is classified as a form of imitation, an identification with one's model at the same time that one attempts to surpass it. [. . .] On the one hand, then, emulation means *identification* with another person, a model, or an ideal. [. . .] On the other hand, it simultaneously means *rivalry*; it is a competitive urge that necessarily involves struggle, but which can also [. . .] entail feelings of hatred and envy."⁶ So if one's rival is not necessarily one's enemy, neither is rivalry an entirely innocuous emotion. Giovanni Pisano's rivalrous inscription on the Pistoia Pulpit, for example, can be read almost as a metaphoric paricide: "Giovanni carved it who performed no empty work, born of Niccolò but blessed with greater skill, Pisa gave him birth, endowed with learning in all things visual." Ignoring fourteenth-century beliefs about nature and nurture, Giovanni suggests that his talent owes little if anything to his father but rather to Pisa, the city of his birth, while implying with the adjective *beatus* that his gift is a blessing bestowed by God.⁷

At its most extreme, rivalry may devolve into hatred and even bloodshed, as described in Benvenuto Cellini's autobiographical accounts of his own acts of violence (some of them invented – presumably wishful thinking).⁸ More often, however, though Hatfields and McCoys may kill each other, Titians and Michelangelos sublimate their antagonism in artistic endeavor.

To repeat, then, and to answer the second question posed at the beginning of this discussion: the Renaissance was an inherently rivalrous age that began with a competition. Rivalry was institutionalized in the competition for the bronze doors of the Florence Baptistery at the turn of the fifteenth century. Announced by the Arte dei Mercanti di Calimala (the Merchants' Guild) during winter 1400–1401, the competition for the Baptistery doors may not have been the first such contest to determine a major public commission, but it was probably the most conspicuous, and for Florence, the most prestigious, involving the city's most venerable building (Figs. 1, 2, 3). Its venerability derived from remarkable and perhaps willful historical amnesia: built between 1059 and 1150, since Dante's day the Baptistery had been identified as an ancient Roman structure. The timing of the contest to coincide with the beginning of the new century may have been happenstance and yet not entirely a matter of indifference. The commission for the Baptistery doors was bound to hopes for the new era.⁹ At the same time, the competition announced – and encouraged – rivalry as a motif of the times. Perhaps Lorenzo Ghiberti and Filippo Brunelleschi, the



1 Florence, Baptistery.



2 Lorenzo Ghiberti. *Sacrifice of Isaac* (competition panel). Gilded bronze. Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello.



3 Filippo Brunelleschi. *Sacrifice of Isaac* (competition panel). Gilded bronze. Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello.

leading competitors for the Baptistery commission, would have disliked each other in any case, but the contest became the flashpoint for their bitter and lifelong rivalry and a prototype for competition among artists.

Renaissance rivalry implies parity or near-parity, which is to say, one's rival is essentially one's peer: one does not duel with an inferior. This equality implies in turn an appreciation of an artist's status that was characteristic of the Renaissance. Patrons had always had preferences, but since the fourteenth century in Italy, beginning with such masters as Giotto and Simone Martini and such enlightened patrons as Petrarch and Robert of Anjou, the *individual* genius of artists had been vaunted. An artist may have a peer or peers – though the rhetoric of praise characteristically denies that fact – but one great master is not *interchangeable* with another.

The result of the Florentine competition of 1400–1401 was to be the second set of doors for the Baptistery. The first set, executed by Andrea Pisano between 1329 and 1336, was also the result of a competition – not among artists, however, but among cities.¹⁰ Essentially political and often bellicose, these civic rivalries, interlaced with local pride or *campanilismo*, were given nonviolent expression in the construction of such public monuments. (The cathedral expression in the construction of such public monuments in any *campanile* or bell tower was one of the most conspicuous monuments in any

medieval or Renaissance Italian city and almost certainly the tallest: hence *campanilismo*.) The Florentine decision to commission the first set of doors for the Baptistery, for example, had been encouraged by the bronze doors of Pisa cathedral, made by Bonanus of Pisa in 1186 (and remade after the fire of 1595). The Florentines dispatched the goldsmith Piero di Jacopo to Pisa in 1329 to record those rival doors two months before Andrea Pisano set to work.¹¹ Having determined that their Baptistery doors were to be “as beautiful as possible,” the Calimala charged Piero to “go to Pisa to see those doors that are in said city and to portray them,” literally, to make their “portrait.”¹²

The Florentines were not the only ambitious Italians. The construction of a new Florence cathedral beginning in 1296 had prompted Siena to rebuild their own Duomo, intended to be larger and in every way grander than the Florentine colossus.¹³ The unfinished foundations of this abandoned building campaign stand next to the apse, testimony to Siena’s thwarted ambition in the rivalry with Florence.

In the fifteenth century and thereafter, rivalry of patronage on the city-state level became increasingly personalized, involving both individual and corporate patrons. The Calimala, for example, were inspired to proceed with plans for the Baptistery doors because, beginning in the 1390s, a rival guild, the Arte della Lana (Wool Manufacturers), had been financing – and completing – decoration of the cathedral’s Porta della Mandorla. Focusing on this local target in the civic arena, the Calimala transcended the ancient enmity between Florence and Siena, inviting two Sienese contestants to participate in the Baptistery competition. In Richard Krautheimer’s words, “Florentine *campanilismo* must have winced.”¹⁴

The Baptistery competition was later described by the winner, Lorenzo Ghiberti: “To me was conceded the palm of victory. [. . .] To me the glory was conceded unanimously, without any exception.”¹⁵ Other sources, including Brunelleschi’s biography, confirm the gist of his account.¹⁶ In the autobiographical *Commentarii*, Ghiberti reported that six artists competed in addition to himself, each being required by the contest rules to create a bronze plaque of the same subject, the *Sacrifice of Isaac*. Among the *combattitori*, as he called the contestants, only Brunelleschi and Ghiberti himself were native-born citizens of Florence.¹⁷ Their works were judged by a committee of thirty-four who prepared a written report for the guild, but this document has been lost. The committee’s decision was surely influenced by the fact that Ghiberti’s panel weighed 7 kilos less than Brunelleschi’s, savings in bronze that signified considerable savings of money.¹⁸ And whether the contest was rigged (as Brunelleschi’s supporters charged) or honest (as Ghiberti maintained), the Baptistery competition set a precedent for similar procedures in relation to other public commissions, including that of the Shrine of Saint Zenobius in 1432, also won by Ghiberti.¹⁹

Whatever Vasari might have known about the practical considerations involved in the competition or the acrimony between Ghiberti and Brunelleschi, he described the compartment of the principals as exemplary, in stark contrast

with the destructive invidiousness of his contemporaries. The story is told in the first edition of Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* in 1550 and repeated in 1568, and the heroes are Brunelleschi and Donatello, who is wrongly described as one of the contestants. Judging themselves and the others, they eliminated all but two of the competition panels for various reasons. Even Donatello's (fictitious) submission, "well designed and badly wrought," was dismissed. Ghiberti's was the best, in their opinion. "Neither was Brunelleschi's narrative much inferior, however." But viewing all the entrants, Donatello and Brunelleschi agreed that Ghiberti's panel was superior:

And thus they persuaded the consuls with good reasons that the commission be given to Ghiberti, showing that public and private spheres would be better served thereby. And this was truly true goodness of friends and virtue without envy and a healthy judgment in knowing themselves, for which they deserved more praise than if they themselves had brought the work to perfection. Happy spirits who, while helping each other, delighted in praising another's labors, how unhappy are now our own spirits, [...] dying of envy in biting others.²⁰

"Virtue without envy" may have been Vasari's ideal, but certainly not his reality, as he himself lamented. Of course neither was it fifteenth-century reality, a time characterized by a pattern of rivalries among artists, their patrons, their champions, and their styles. These various kinds of competition are visualized in another Florentine edifice, the guild church of Orsanmichele.²¹ Constructed as a grain loggia in 1336-37, the building was venerated as the site of a miraculous image of the Virgin Mary. (Unhappily, its miracles did not include self-preservation, and the panel was replaced by Bernardo Daddi's *Madonna and Child Enthroned*, commissioned in 1347 and enframed by Andrea Oragna's magnificent tabernacle, signed and dated 1359.) Each of the guilds was expected to contribute a statue of its patron saint to decorate the exterior piers of Orsanmichele. Most of the guilds proved delinquent, however, and in 1406 the Signoria sought to jolt them into action by imposing a ten-year deadline for the completion of the statues and their enframing niches. A guild's failure to do so was to be punished by forfeiture of the pier and its assignment to another guild – a very public and *permanent* humiliation.²² Despite these admonitions, the enterprise took more than twenty years to complete, but the result was twelve sculptures: three each by Ghiberti, Donatello, and Nanni di Banco; one by Niccolò di Pietro Lamberti; and one attributed to Bernardo Ciuffagni but possibly designed by Brunelleschi.²³

At Orsanmichele, rivalry among the patrons is inherent in the juxtaposition of their commissions: seen in immediate proximity, the statues invite comparison by the beholder. Moreover, none of these commissions is anonymous: each statue was labeled by its patron with the guild coat of arms. On at least one occasion, the guilds' rivalry was mandated by a contractual clause imposing competition on the artist, requiring the sculptor-signatory to outdo the



4 Lorenzo Ghiberti. *Saint John the Baptist*. Bronze. Florence, Orsanmichele.

others and indeed himself, in satisfying his patron. When it was installed in 1416, the Calimala's *Saint John the Baptist* (Fig. 4) was the largest bronze statue of its time (the Calimala was also his employer for the Baptistery doors). Consequently, when the Arte del Cambio (Bankers) hired Ghiberti to execute their *Saint Matthew* for Orsanmichele, they stipulated that he must "make the said figure of Saint Matthew of fine bronze [...] at least as big as the Calimala's figure of Saint John the Baptist, or bigger, however would be best in the judgment of the said Lorenzo Ghiberti."²⁴ "Bigger" means better.

The fact that several masters were engaged in the Orsanmichele program was surely related to the number of patrons involved and to the timetable for completion of the work imposed by the Signoria. Elsewhere, cycles of sculpture for architectural monuments were more commonly assigned to an individual artist and his shop. Had history not interfered with their good intentions, for example, the Calimala would have proceeded to commission a second set of bronze doors from Andrea Pisano, who had completed the first set in 1336. A century later, when Ghiberti's doors were finally done, the Calimala turned to him again, for the final, third set of Baptistery doors, the Gates of Paradise. (This epithet is a pun, credited to Michelangelo, referring both to the beauty of the work as worthy of the celestial Gates of Paradise and to the space between the Baptistery and cathedral, called the *Paradiso*.²⁵) Commissions for painted cycles were likewise usually awarded to individual artists and their shops – Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, for example – or to artist-patrons, such as Masaccio and Masolino in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence.

The idea was not juxtaposition of styles but rather accommodation. In 1476, concerned that too many cooks would spoil his broth, the Duke of Milan, Galeazzo Maria Sforza, admonished the three artists decorating San Giacomo in Pavia, Bonifacio Bembo of Cremona, Vincenzo Foppa, and Jacomino Zanario. They were to complete the frescoes according to their contracts, avoiding the use of "many hands" lest the results seem "deformed": "we wish that you observe your obligations, painting the paintings so that they not seem to be badly executed, as a result of being painted by many hands, as you seem to be doing; but one of you must do the work, being obligated to do so, and do it as soon as possible."²⁶ A similar desire for homogeneity prompted the Piccolomini to add a clause to the contracts with Michelangelo regarding his contributions to their altar in Siena cathedral, begun by Andrea Bregno and including work by several other masters as well. In these documents of 1501 and again in 1504, Michelangelo was asked "for his honor and courtesy and humanity" to finish the draperies and head of the *Saint Francis*, left incomplete by his enemy Pietro Torrigiani (perhaps this fact explains the appeal to his better nature), "so that it not reveal a master and different hand, [...] so that everyone who may see it will say that it was his work," that is, entirely Michelangelo's.²⁷

Such patrons as the Piccolomini and Sforza meant to suppress anything (including over-reliance on assistants) that might threaten the harmonious appearance of their projects. By implication this meant to suppress artistic rivalry, or at least artistic individuality. The ideal of stylistic homogenization also found expression in the common contractual stipulation that the artist-signatory execute his commission "with his own hand," *a sua mano*. Of course, artists did not customarily work alone, and patrons were well aware of the fact – and aware too that the requirement was probably unenforceable in practice. The clause may be understood less as a legality than as a reflection of a patron's practical concerns – disparities of style would mar the results – and also his (or, occasionally, her) understanding of disparate artistic abilities.²⁸ At its simplest, that understanding is predicated on the assumption that assistants are not so good as their masters. The patron is paying for the master's work, not the pupil's. Such pragmatic concerns were increasingly subjugated to a belief in the inimitability of artistic genius. His hand becomes the hand of Raphael, of Michelangelo, of Titian, and no other will do.

In *Purgatory* (xi.91–96), Dante declared that the public perception of greatness is fickle: "O empty glory of human powers! [...] Cimabue thought to hold the field in painting, and now Giotto has the cry, so that the other's fame is dim." No one, certainly not Cimabue or even Giotto, can expect his achievements to win immortality. Implicit in Dante's account of ephemeral, hence meaningless, worldly success is the idea of confrontation of styles, and the triumph of one over the other: Giotto's manner displaces Cimabue's. Whereas Dante implied that Giotto, too, would be surpassed, his great fifteenth-century commentator thought otherwise. Discussing artists in his *Apologia di Dante* published in 1481, Cristoforo Landino praised Giotto as Cimabue's "noble

successor. [...] He was so perfect [...] that since his time, many others have been exhausting themselves having wished to outdo him."²⁹

By Landino's day, a time more sanguine than Dante's about the worth of human accomplishments, individual style had come to be of fundamental importance in the appreciation of art. This new way of thinking is exemplified – not to say embodied – by Isabella d'Este Gonzaga, Marchesa of Mantua, in her protracted dealings with Giovanni Bellini. In November 1496 the marchesa opened negotiations with Bellini for a secular subject, to be displayed in her Studiolo in the Castello Gonzaga at Mantua, and at first Bellini expressed willingness to comply.³⁰ It is not known what subject Isabella had in mind, but it must have been akin to the first *fantasia* produced for the Studiolo, the *Parnassus* (*Mars and Venus*), by Andrea Mantegna, Bellini's brother-in-law and the Gonzaga court painter.³¹ Isabella had been discussing Mantegna's possible commissions for the Studiolo with him as early as 1492, even before the room was complete. *Parnassus* was probably begun in 1496 and installed by 3 July 1497.³² The chronology of the sequence of Isabella's dealings with the painters is suggestive. In 1496, with Mantegna's *Parnassus* presumably in progress, Isabella was already planning a second work for the Studiolo by Bellini. Judging from her later correspondence about portraits by Bellini and Leonardo da Vinci, one would not be putting words in Isabella's mouth to say that she wished to see works by Bellini and Mantegna *al parangone*, as she spelled the word.³³ (The situation recalls the confrontation of the *Canotie* by Luca della Robbia and Donatello in Florence cathedral, a *paragone* intended by the patrons.³⁴) Bellini was the first foreign master she sought for her Studiolo, after or perhaps at the same time as she began her project with her own court painter.

Isabella was still waiting five years later. According to her agent Michele Vianello, writing from Venice on 2 March 1501, Bellini's explanation for the delay was that he "was constrained by the Venetian government to continue the work begun in the Palazzo Ducale," in the Sala del Maggior Consiglio, "and he couldn't leave at any time."³⁵ Notwithstanding his obligations from dawn to dusk, however, Bellini would do the painting for Isabella, "when he could. About the price, he asked me for 150 ducats, but he'll come down to 100."³⁶

A month later (1 April) Vianello informed Isabella that Bellini required the measurements for her painting – and an initial payment of 25 ducats.³⁷ The ducats were sent, and also instructions for an *istoria* or narrative.³⁸ Unfortunately, these instructions have been lost, but whatever Isabella wanted, it must have been high-minded and mythological, a suitable companion piece for the *Parnassus* and for the other "fantasies" that eventually decorated the room.³⁹

Having received Isabella's 25 ducats, Bellini began to express reluctance about her narrative and the rivalrous juxtaposition of his work with Mantegna's. Vianello reported Bellini's doubts in a letter dated 25 June 1501: regarding that *istoria* which Your Ladyship has given him, one cannot say how very unwillingly he would do it, because he knows the judgment of Your

Ladyship and then [because] it is going to the comparison [*via al parangone*] with those works by Messer Andrea [Mantegna] and, notwithstanding, in this work he wishes to do as much as he will know how to do, and he says that in this *istoria* he cannot do the things that would fit well, nor does it have anything good in it, and he would do it most very unwillingly as much as one can say, so that I doubt that he would serve Your Excellency as she would desire. So that, if it appears to Your Excellency to give him the liberty to do what he pleases, I am most certain that Your Ladyship will be much better served.⁴⁰

Whatever his doubts about the subject or himself, Bellini's refusal to "va al parangone" with Mantegna may also have been reluctance to undermine his brother-in-law, who had never been able to take Isabella's favor for granted.⁴¹ And whatever Vianello's doubts about Bellini, his advice to Isabella is extraordinary: "give him liberty," *datti libertà*. More remarkable still, Isabella accepted this recommendation, asking only that Bellini paint a classical theme: "If Giovanni Bellini would do this *istoria* so very unwillingly, [...] we shall be content to submit to his judgment, provided that he paint some ancient narrative or fable of his own invention or pretending to be one that represents something ancient."⁴²

Isabella's tempered response to the artist's caviling suggests that she may have learned from her husband, Marchese Francesco II Gonzaga, that submitting to Bellini's judgment was the only way to get him to cooperate. In October 1497 – one year after the beginning of Isabella's negotiations with the painter – Gonzaga had been forced to this conclusion, writing to Bellini that he would "defer to your judgment regarding what should be painted" on a picture in the marchese's collection. Gonzaga had wanted Bellini to "paint the city of Paris" but accepted Bellini's explanation for rejecting this idea, "because I have never seen it."⁴³ Surely the marchese knew as well as Bellini did that artists commonly paint what they have never seen: his gracious acceptance of what he must have recognized as a lame excuse means that Gonzaga wanted something by Bellini's hand more than he wanted to "see" Paris on his picture. Bellini in turn acknowledged the marchese's flexibility in a letter that is at once appropriately sycophantic, in the traditional fashion of a Renaissance painter addressing his noble patron, and assertive, in the artist's declaration of his intellectual independence:

I have learned from Your Lordship's letter that Your Lordship has changed his mind about my adding a view of the city of Paris to the painting that I have [in hand]. And this because I have never seen it. Your Most Excellent Lordship for his humanity and benignity yields to my judgment that I paint on said painting what seems appropriate to me. [...] thus I shall fortify myself with my little talent [*ingegno*] to do that which would be pleasing to Your Excellency.

Again that with a more secure soul I shall have served you, having understood something of your fantasy [*fantasia*], but I shall not cease, as I have

said, from using my every diligence in order to content Your Most Illustrious Lordship.⁴⁴

Clearly, both the Marchese and the Marchesa of Mantua desired to possess works by Bellini, and the artist was evidently much discussed at their court (more on their discussions presently). While Isabella pursued Bellini, Bellini continued his Fabian tactics, adding injury to insult when he completed a *Saint Dominic* for her brother, Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara. Rubbing salt in the wound, Isabella's agent Lorenzo da Pavia informed her about the painting in a letter offering *pro forma* reassurance about the work Bellini was supposedly doing for her: "Regarding the [marchesa's] painting by Giovanni Bellini, he is being pressed with all diligence. Now he has completed a half-figure of Saint Dominic on a small panel, which is very beautiful, and it was done for Lord Alfonso."⁴⁵

Isabella persisted, and Bellini reassured her that he would paint "a fantasy in his own way."⁴⁶ By now, however, her patience was wearing thin, and Isabella changed her mind. Instead of the secular narrative for her study, which Bellini had not yet produced, she would like a *Presepio*, that is, a *Nativity*, for a bedroom: "we don't care anymore about said picture [the fantasy] and if, instead of that work, he would like to do a *Nativity*, we shall remain very content. [...]. In this *Nativity*, we shall want to have the Madonna and Our Lord God, Saint Joseph, a Saint John the Baptist, and the beasts."⁴⁷

Bellini seemed to agree to this commission, though Isabella rejected his suggestion that he use the canvas he had already prepared for the abandoned Studiolo picture: the *Nativity* was meant for a bedroom, Isabella said, and not her study. She required different dimensions, therefore – and offered a different fee, also because the *Nativity* entailed fewer figures than the secular subject.⁴⁸ Perhaps Isabella felt she was pressing her luck by insisting too much, however, because in a subsequent letter she offered an olive branch, or a loophole: "We are content that Master Giovanni Bellini do the *Nativity* in place of the *istoria*. If for some reason he shows himself inclined to abandon the '*Nativity*' and to do some other of his new inventions of the Madonna, we shall be content that he do so: [but] the truth is that we shall be more content with the *Nativity*."⁴⁹

Bellini's answer to this was that the presence of Saint John the Baptist at the *Nativity* was "inappropriate" – *fuori de proximo*. Instead of the *Nativity*, therefore, he proposed to do "a Madonna and Child, with the Baptist and some distant vistas [*luntani*] and other fantasies" – and all this for a bargain price of 50 ducats.⁵⁰ At first, Isabella was willing to accept such a painting, provided that the Madonna include Saint Jerome as well as the Baptist, "with the other inventions that will then seem appropriate" to Bellini.⁵¹ But ten days after dispatching these instructions to her agent, on 22 November 1502, she declared that she had changed her mind. She wanted a *Nativity* after all, though she would leave the choice of canvas or panel to Bellini, and – more importantly – she agreed that he might

indeed make the *Nativity* without Saint John the Baptist, since he will still be satisfied about it, because the change that we made [in requesting a *Madonna*] was made because of the concern that he unwillingly accepted the commission of the *Nativity*, the painting of which [subject] we desire more than any other because we don't have one; and on that account we implore you that he begin the painting and *that he do it in his own way so that it be beautiful and correspond to the fame of the painter*.⁵²

The subject mattered, but the beauty of the work as an example of Bellini's art mattered even more.

The painting was nearing completion by next fall, but Isabella's correspondent would not be allowed to see it: "it will not be possible for me to see the picture that Giovanni Bellini is painting because *he never shows anyone anything of his that is not finished*."⁵³ (The insistence on working in secrecy also characterized Michelangelo, at this same date finishing his *David* behind walls that he had had constructed to assure his privacy.)

Still waiting for her *Nativity* in April 1504, Isabella lost patience. Writing to the Venetian nobleman Alvise Marcello, the marchesa explained that she wanted her 25 ducats back from the artist, even if it became necessary to "say a word about it to the Serene Prince," that is, the doge, "or to another magistrate." It was the principle of the thing that prompted Isabella's request for Marcello's intervention, "not so much for the recovery of the cash, as not to endure the injury received from Bellini."⁵⁴ The threat, or perhaps her addressing Bellini through a patrician intermediary, worked. Bellini himself replied to Isabella with a letter expressing his contrition, "kneeling to beg her pardon [...] praying to Our Lord God that if in the course of time he has not so satisfied the aforesaid Your Ladyship [...], in this work she remain content," referring to the picture that he was at long last completing for the marchesa.⁵⁵ There is a three-month gap, however, between Isabella's complaint to Marcello, dated 10 April 1504, and Bellini's letter of apology to Isabella, dated 2 July, the implication being, in those days of rapid communication by messenger, that the painter may have been apologetic, but he was not in any hurry to say so. Bellini's delay in replying belies the abject tone of the letter. Isabella accepted his apology, however, writing to the artist within the week (9 July): "If the painting of the picture that you have made in our name corresponds to your fame, as we hope, we shall remain satisfied with you."⁵⁶

Isabella had already received some encouraging news about the work. Lorenzo da Pavia had been able to reassure her in a letter of 6 July 1504 that Bellini's painting "truly is a beautiful thing, he has done better than I believed. I know that it will please Your Excellency. And in this painting he has really done his utmost, mostly for respect of Messer Andrea Mantegna" – not for his patron, that is, but for his kinsman and rival.⁵⁷ Evidently Bellini continued to see himself, or his work, in precisely the kind of *paragone* he reportedly had wished to avoid in shirking Isabella's first commission for a *fantasia*. Lorenzo certainly understood the situation in this way and thought that the sense of



5 Giorgione: *Allendale Nativity*. Panel. Washington, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection.

rivalry had inspired Bellini to honor both himself and his brother-in-law by making a work of exceptional beauty, "Even though it's true that in invention he can't approach the most excellent Messer Andrea. So that I pray Your Ladyship deign to take the painting for her honor and also for the effect of the work."⁵⁸ In a letter of 16 July, while repeating that the *Nativity* "really is a very beautiful thing," Lorenzo reiterated his criticism of the figures but now added praise for Bellini's colorism: "I would have wished the figures larger. As I wrote in my other letter, in invention no one can approach Messer Andrea Mantegna, [...] but in coloring, Giovanni Bellini is excellent."⁵⁹ A third letter, written after the marchesa had received the painting, implies that Isabella may have shared Lorenzo's reservation that "the figures are small."⁶⁰ Lorenzo's reference to the figures' "reduced" scale has often been interpreted as an indication that Bellini's painting, which has been lost, resembled Giorgione's *Allendale Nativity* (Fig. 5). The critical opinion of Lorenzo and perhaps of Isabella herself regarding the "small figures" is a matter of taste: whereas Bellini and other Venetian masters painted landscapes – including, we may assume, Isabella's *Nativity* – in which figures are indeed small in comparison with their

setting, Mantegna emphasized the figures, who dominate their world. The manner in which Bellini privileged the landscape, which seemed inept to Lorenzo, may have seemed *modern* to other viewers.

This criticism notwithstanding, Lorenzo advised the marchesa to buy the painting without fail: "and all the more so, [Bellini's] being very old and getting worse."⁶¹ In other words, this might be Isabella's only chance to get a painting by Bellini, and moreover, Lorenzo added, it seemed that the painter might have another client interested in the picture. Isabella bought the *Nativity* and was so pleased with it that she reopened negotiations with Bellini for a *fantasia* for the Studiolo. This time, however, Isabella asked Pietro Bembo to intervene with Bellini on her behalf. The Venetian humanist, poet, and prelate was himself a patron of Bellini's, and on friendly terms with him.

Like Isabella's own correspondence, Bembo's letters document a reversal of the traditional patron-painter relationship, describing Bellini's willfulness and advising Isabella to cajole him, if she wants him to satisfy her request. Bellini would paint her narrative, Bembo assured Isabella in a letter dated 1 January 1506, "as soon as the measurements or canvas is sent." But, he warned, Isabella would be constrained to forgo the invention she had in mind, about which she had previously written to Bembo, and submit herself to the artist's will: "Bellini [. . .] is most well-disposed to serve Your Excellency whenever he has the painting's measurements or the canvas. It will be necessary that the invention that Your Ladyship wrote to me, which I find on the drawing" – that is, for Bembo to transmit to Bellini – "be accommodated to the fantasy of him who has to paint it [. . .] very precise terms do not suit his style, *accustomed as he says always to roam at his will in paintings*."⁶²

Perhaps because Bembo's letter has been much cited, one forgets how extraordinary is his description of Bellini's artistic imagination and creative freedom – subjects that he and Bembo had evidently discussed. But the letter must also be read in the context of Isabella's dealings with other masters at the same time, notably Mantegna and Pietro Perugino. Like most patrons, Isabella was flexible about certain particulars and had fixed ideas about others. In any event, Perugino did essentially what he was told to do; adjustments to the original program of his *Triumph of Chastity* were authorized or suggested by Isabella herself.⁶³ Mantegna, as the Gonzaga court painter, was expected to satisfy Isabella's requests. He was not always so accommodating, however, when dealing with outsiders, including Bona of Savoy, Duchess of Milan. She had written to Marchese Federico (Isabella's father-in-law) with the request that Mantegna produce a painting based on "certain drawings" which she included with her letter of 9 June 1480. Federico showed the *disegni* to "my painter Andrea Mantegna," the marchese informed the duchess in his reply of 20 June. But Mantegna was uninterested: "he tells me that it would be a job more for a miniaturist." Federico tried unsuccessfully to persuade him, "but usually these excellent masters have [a quality] of fantasy, and it's better to take from them what one can get" – in this case, apparently nothing.⁶⁴ The marchese's explanation anticipates Bembo's letter to Isabella some twenty-five years later, but

with this critical difference. Seeking to placate the Duchess of Milan, Federico Gonzaga provided Mantegna with the "artistic temperament" defense, which may be seen in part as the marchese's offering a more gracious motive for the artist's refusal than Mantegna had provided for himself. The painter's suggesting a larger commission might be seen as vernal; the marchese's suggesting that "recognized masters have something of the fanciful" is high-minded. All of this is Federico's explanation, not Mantegna's. Bembo's letter, on the contrary, quotes Bellini himself, informing Isabella moreover that the painter is "accustomed" to his artistic freedom. Equally (or more) remarkable, Bembo's letter documents the fact that Bellini's imagination was a subject of discussion between the painter and noble humanist.

Only Bellini was capable of resisting the marchesa's "assaults," like the fortress to which Bembo compared him in a letter of 27 August 1505. In this letter, Bembo reassured Isabella, "I have not forgotten that I promised Your Ladyship to do everything in my power to see that Giovanni Bellini accept the commission of a painting for Your Ladyship's Studiolo. [. . .] In sum, we have waged such a battle against him that I believe the fortress will surrender. To achieve which end it would be most helpful if Your Ladyship wrote him a warm letter about it, urging him to please her, and send it by my hand, as I am certain that the letter would not be written in vain."⁶⁵ Bembo's offer to deliver Isabella's letter confirms his close relationship with Bellini and his commitment to her project.

Isabella listened to her Venetian adviser, and the saga ends with a letter to Bellini that is tantamount to a subjugation of her will to his. The marchesa even excused herself to the painter for not having written earlier:

Messer Giovanni. However much our desire may have been to have a picture painted with a narrative from your hand to place in our studio near those of your brother-in-law Mantegna, you have easily let the agreed times pass so that we have not had the narrative done promptly, but on account of your many obligations, you have not been able to do it; and [. . .] we have accepted the *Nativity* in place of the narrative [*historia*] that you initially promised to do, which greatly pleases us, holding it as dear as any painting that we have. [. . .] we have been vexed with a fever so that we have not been able to attend to such matters, but now that we are in better health, it has come to us to write this present letter of ours, praying you that you will be agreeable to painting another picture, and *we leave to you the responsibility of conceiving the poetic invention*, when you do not doubt that we desire it, that beyond the courteous and honorable payment for it, we shall feel eternal gratitude.⁶⁶

This is the kind of artistic license that Leonardo and even Michelangelo perhaps dreamed of but rarely achieved in commissioned works – and which Titian was able to claim for himself only by sending *uncommissioned* paintings to King Philip II of Spain for which the painter hoped eventually to be paid. Titian, like Bellini, took "responsibility for conceiving the poetic invention";



6 Andrea Mantegna. *Cult of Cybele*. Canvas. London, National Gallery.

but, unlike Bellini (and in at least one instance, Michelangelo), he had no assurance of payment, there being no contractual agreement with his royal patron for these works.⁶⁷

Bellini's refusal to paint a narrative for Isabella's Studiolo is usually interpreted as an expression, or confession, of insecurity – a concern that his efforts might not equal Mantegna's achievement. But there is another way of interpreting Bellini's response to Isabella, namely as an assertion of his status and the uniqueness of his art: "not to be compared," *non andare al paragone*, may imply "incomparable," without paragon. Isabella herself confirmed Bellini's self-regard by her wrangling to obtain work by him, ultimately accepting whatever he was willing to offer, as indeed her husband had been, in accepting Bellini's reluctance to paint the city of Paris. Bembo's letters to Isabella confirm this interpretation of the master's artistic autonomy: no one can tell Bellini, Bembo told Isabella, what to do. Earlier artists may have felt the same way about avoiding comparison or dictating to their patrons, but we have no contemporaneous record of their feelings – in part, presumably, because no one considered them worth recording.⁶⁸

In Bembo's letter to Isabella of 1 January 1506, urging her to let Bellini roam at his will, the writer also asked a favor of Isabella, that she intervene with Mantegna on behalf of Francesco Corner (Cornaro), Bembo's friend and kinsman. The previous spring, Corner had commissioned Mantegna to paint a frieze in grisaille representing the life of Scipio Africanus, the ancestor of the Corner, according to the family's mythologized genealogy. "Now he tells me," Bembo wrote, "that this Messer Andrea doesn't want to do the work anymore for the agreed price, and he's asking for a lot more. [...] For which reason, I pray and supplicate Your Ladyship [...] that Your Ladyship persuade Messer Andrea to honor the commitment given to Messer Francesco. [...] I promise you that all that Your Ladyship does with Messer Andrea to help resolve the matter of Messer Francesco's paintings, the said Messer Francesco will repay from here to be of use in expediting Your Ladyship's affairs with Giovanni Bellini."⁶⁹

Unfortunately, as Isabella explained in her reply, Mantegna was gravely ill. Indeed, he died shortly thereafter, having finished only the *Cult of Cybele* (Fig. 6).⁷¹ And now Bellini agreed to complete the cycle for the Corner though



7 Giovanni Bellini and assistants. *Countenance of Scipio*. Canvas. Washington, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection.

delegating the greater part of the execution of the work, representing the *Countenance of Scipio*, to assistants (Fig. 7). In this case, it seems that a direct confrontation with (or against?) Mantegna did not disturb Bellini, and neither did the fact that he was the patron's second choice.⁷² Although Mantegna was now dead, this was not, and is not, relevant to the *paragone* of his art with Bellini's – a *paragone* inevitably more directly in the Corner studio than anything Isabella might have conceived, given the theme of the life of Scipio Africanus and the use of grisaille. One may wonder too that Bellini should have assigned so much of the Corner commission to assistants. Was he uninterested in the subject or in painting fictive reliefs in grisaille?

Whatever Bellini's motivations, it was the painter, not the patron, who controlled their dealings and determined the outcome because something fundamental had changed in the conception of art and its acquisition. Isabella wanted something by Bellini's hand more than she wanted a painting of a particular subject. The patron's primary concern was the acquisition of a work – *any* work – by a certain master. Now we may speak of "a Leonardo, a Raphael, a Titian, a Michelangelo," thus making the artist's name synonymous with his art, and indeed, in some cases, more significant than the particular work. This decidedly modern conception of art and artists began with such collectors as Isabella and such masters as Bellini. As for the artist himself, here too one recognizes a sea change in self-perception, as Bellini, his contemporaries and successors become more professionally self-aware than their predecessors, and in consequence, more rivalrous.

Isabella's brother Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, was similarly concerned with matters of individual style. After the death of Raphael in 1520, for example, the duke was unwilling to accept a work by the artists' heirs in fulfillment of the master's contract for a *Hunt of Meleager*, intended for the duke's Camerino d'Alabastro. Alfonso's decision was predicated on the distinction between idea and execution. Raphael had already conceived the composition, so his heirs Giulio Romano and Gianfrancesco Penni would have been following the master's directions in completing what he had begun. Alfonso wanted not only Raphael's conception, however; he wanted Raphael's *facure*. In the context of the painting's intended site, the Camerino, this was particularly important. The work had to be autograph because it was to be displayed with

other works by other masters. (Dante's reference to Cimabue and Giotto in *Purgatory* anticipates this kind of confrontation between great masters, though the poet's primary concern in naming them was to illustrate the vainglory of human powers.) Unlike Galeazzo Maria Sforza in Milan or the Piccolomini in Siena, who wanted homogeneity in individual cycles or monuments, Alfonso purposefully sought artistic difference for his Camerino.

The idea had a classical pedigree. Philostratus the Elder had extolled the juxtaposition of works by different masters as a demonstration of the patron's abilities as collector and connoisseur. The fictional villa of the *Imagines* is "particularly splendid," Philostratus explained, "by reason of the panel-paintings set in the walls, paintings which I thought had been collected with real judgment, for they exhibited the skill of very many painters."⁷³ With this text in hand, Alfonso planned to decorate his study with works by various masters, stylistic variety being the spice of the collection.⁷⁴ Isabella – whose copy of Philostratus Alfonso had borrowed – did the same in her Studiolo in Mantua. Predicated on the juxtaposition of works by different masters, such arrangements necessarily involve competition among makers and their collectors. When Isabella decorated her Studiolo or Alfonso his Camerino, they did so with the express purpose of comparison: works by the greatest masters were meant to be seen together. Competing in the acquisition and display of their collections, such patrons as the covetous Este siblings inevitably stirred competition among artists whose works they displayed together. Ancient and contemporary art, sculpture, and painting, works by Venetians, Romans, Florentines, and Northerners, confronted each other in intimate spaces that invited the viewer's engagement in games of connoisseurship and interpretation. Rivalry was inherent in the very concept of a study, therefore, as patrons themselves inform us when they require that each master's work is to be worthy of display with its predecessors – a variant on the familiar contractual clause stipulating that works equal or surpass similar works done for other patrons. In the case of a study, precisely because the patron and the site were the same, the artist was compelled to confront his competitors directly: their works were made to be compared not in the viewer's memory but in the act of beholding. Rivalry among collectors is thus interwoven with rivalry among the artists they patronized – Titian competing with Giovanni Bellini in Alfonso's Camerino, for example, or Bellini refusing to compete with Mantegna in Isabella's Studiolo. Rivalry among artists was similarly bound to confrontational patterns of patronage at Orsammichele. Yet the most conspicuous instance of authorial multiplicity in the execution of a Renaissance cycle, and the most prestigious, involved only one patron: Pope Sixtus IV della Rovere and his Sistine Chapel.

Constructed between 1475 and 1481, the chapel was decorated during the following two years with papal portraits and cycles of Moses and Christ by Sandro Botticelli, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Cosimo Rosselli, Perugino, Bernardino Pinturicchio, and Luca Signorelli (Figs. 8, 9, 10).⁷⁵ The pope's choices reflect his taste. In the chapel and elsewhere, Sixtus favored Central





9 Sandro Botticelli. *Punishment of Korah*. Fresco. Vatican, Sistine Chapel.

Italians and Tuscans in particular. North Italians are entirely absent from his roster, and, most remarkably, one great Florentine master is conspicuous by his absence: Leonardo da Vinci, who moved to Milan just as the chapel decoration was getting under way. The omission is all the more significant given the fact that three of Sixtus's artists – Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, and Perugino – had been associated with Leonardo's own master, Andrea del Verrocchio.⁶

Nothing in the historical record tells us what the painters or their patron thought about the division of labor in the Sistine Chapel, that is, whether Sixtus intended to inspire competition among his artists. The situation was inherently rivalrous, however, as in the Sala del Maggior Consiglio in Venice, where Bellini and Vivarini were similarly set to work together, according to Vasari, “so that competition would make everyone work better.”⁷⁷ Similarly, there was an implicit rivalry among painters (and perhaps between patrons) in Lorenzo il Magnifico's employing three of Sixtus's artists, Botticelli, Perugino, and Ghirlandaio, together with Filippino Lippi, for the decoration of the Medici villa at Spedaletto near Volterra, c. 1490.⁷⁸ Perhaps Sixtus merely hoped that by hiring a number of masters, he would see his chapel completed sooner rather than later.⁷⁹ In any case, he had undeniably created an extraordinary situation, introducing artistic rivalry to one of the most conspicuous sites in Christendom. Even (especially?) in this sacred setting, neither the protagonists nor



10 Pietro Perugino. *Christ Giving the Keys to Saint Peter*. Fresco. Vatican, Sistine Chapel.

their contemporary viewers can have been indifferent to the competitiveness inherent in their joint endeavor. The painters themselves cannot have ignored the fact that their works would be seen together, each praised or found wanting in comparison to the others, with the agon focused on elements of style precisely because all the narratives were required to adhere to certain unifying compositional principles. Similarly, whatever pious or political thoughts may have occurred to the chapel's more discerning Renaissance viewers, they would also have noticed the differences between Botticelli's *Punishment of Korah*, for example, and Perugino's *Christ Giving the Keys to Saint Peter*. Rivalry now had the papal imprimatur.

When Sixtus's nephew and eventual successor, Pope Julius II della Rovere, decided to repaint the Sistine ceiling and to redecorate the Vatican Apartments, he also brought together a disparate group, Raphael and Michelangelo among them. Their rivalry was so acrimonious, at least on Michelangelo's part, that contemporaries took note of it. Indeed, Julius himself was inevitably aware of it and of his fundamental role in their competition. At the same time, Julius was motivated in part by his own competitiveness, casting himself as the rival of his despised predecessor, Alexander VI Borgia, whose decoration of the residential quarters known as the Borgia Apartments the della Rovere pope sought to outdo in magnificence.

Agon

IF SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ITALIANS were to come back to life today, they would discover that history has vindicated their judgment. We still venerate the same masters as they did, notably Leonardo, Raphael, Titian, and Michelangelo. We still rely on the same source for much of our information, namely, Vasari's *Lives*. And we still call their era by the name that they themselves used: Renaissance, *Rinascita* in Italian, that is, "rebirth," alluding to the rebirth of classical civilization.¹

In the early fourteenth century, Petrarch had written of his hopes for the rebirth of the glories of ancient Italy, by which he meant both the political and the cultural achievements of the Roman Empire, achievements that would bring light to the world after centuries of darkness: "For who can doubt that Rome herself would rise again instantly if she began to know herself."² He did not think that he would live to see this rebirth, Petrarch lamented, but he profoundly hoped that future generations would do so. Thus Petrarch articulated two interrelated conceptions of history that Vasari later incorporated into his *Lives*: periods of light opposed to periods of darkness; and the biological cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.³ *What* was reborn, and where, Petrarch has already explained: ancient Roman civilization, to flourish again in Italy. *When* the rebirth took place is recounted by later authors, who, unlike Petrarch, felt themselves to be present at the blessed event. Rather than "rebirth," however, one should speak of "rebirths," because the arts did not arrive, or revive, in tandem. Men of letters led the way. Such fifteenth-century humanists as Flavio Biondo credited Petrarch himself with the revival of classical literary standards.⁴ But Italian literary humanism already existed before Petrarch, notably in the work of Albertino Mussato and Lovato dei Lovati.⁵ In Padua in 1315, Mussato became the first humanist to be publicly crowned with laurel – a consummation devoutly wished by Dante and Petrarch but achieved by them only some years later.⁶ Surely Petrarch, despite his protests (perhaps not entirely disinterested), must have recognized that the renaissance of letters was well under way. As for the visual arts, Giovanni Boccaccio was among the first to announce their rebirth, crediting Giotto with having revived the dead art of painting.



Detail of Fig. 119.

Rivalry is endemic in this cyclical scheme, implicit or explicit as each age succeeds the other, as each master surpasses his predecessors in the sequence of birth, death, and regeneration. By the fifteenth century, artists and their patrons seem to have acknowledged and sometimes to have encouraged rivalry among themselves. They were aided and abetted in this agon by the examples of classical antiquity provided by Pliny the Elder, whose *Natural History* was more widely available than ever before, with the first printed editions appearing c. 1470 and Cristoforo Landino's edition published in 1476. By the end of the century, personal, sometimes deeply felt rivalries among the greatest masters were so powerful that they could become a subject of discourse.

The art history of the High Renaissance as sixteenth-century Italians described it was one of reputations being made, patrons wooed, arguments debated and rivals surpassed. For Vasari, the development of the "modern style" — the style now commonly called the High Renaissance — was propelled by rivalry among the leading masters of his time, as artists responded to each other's work.⁷ Of course Vasari did not "invent" competition, but the theme so permeates the *Lives* as to have encouraged rivalry among his readers, patrons as well as artists.

Artists have always borrowed from each other. Borrowing or reiteration of a prototype was frequently required by contractual stipulation or by sacrosanct traditions regarding the appearance of sacred beings, from the colors they wear to their demeanor when they participate in certain events. Saints are meant to be recognizable, whoever represents them. What is different about the sixteenth century is that the great masters knew each other's work (or knew it better than their predecessors, in part thanks to print media); they often knew each other's major patrons; and they knew each other, sometimes as friends and colleagues, sometimes as enemies but always as rivals.⁸ Their lives and art were bound together perhaps more than in any preceding generation. For sixteenth-century artists, the borrowing or repetition of motifs was not merely quotation or the observance of tradition: it was dialog or dialectic, sometimes combative (as when Titian revises Michelangelo), sometimes a pacific declaration of admiration (when Raphael emulates Leonardo), sometimes hostile (when Cellini confronts Bandinelli). In each case, the response was rivalrous, its intent being to surpass the referent. The sense of rivalry was pervasive, involving past and present, both living competitors in the marketplace and past heroes, dead for centuries but worthy competitors nonetheless. Competition with the classical past included surviving monuments and those known only through laudatory *ekphrases* or descriptions, involving in turn the rivalry or *paragone* between the sister arts, painting and poetry. (For Lodovico Dolce, they were not sisters but "almost brothers."⁹) By definition, the *paragone* is a rivalry that only one art (or artist) can win.

Renaissance rivalry thus embraced the dead as well as the living. And the most ardent rivalry was reserved for the living. Renaissance rivalries, then, were sometimes personal, sometimes a matter of theory or philosophy; they might concern conflicting personalities or contradictory ideas. Artists competed

with each other, sometimes for the immediate and pragmatic advantages of patronage, sometimes in the expectation of immortal fame. These kinds of individual rivalry were often accompanied by regional rivalries, as each republic or commune vaunted the superiority of its own style. *Campanesimo* permeates every facet of Vasari's *Lives*. His preference for Tuscan masters is based on taste, of course, but taste predetermined by his patriotism. Vasari was not alone in allowing "love of the fatherland" to cloud his judgment. Lodovico Ariosto was found guilty of the same error in including Battista and Dosso Dossi in his list of "illustrious painters" in *Orlando furioso*, according to Dolce's "Aretino" (who forgives the great poet this peccadillo).¹⁰ Venetians, of course, were not immune to such patriotic clouding. Even when Sebastiano del Piombo was living and working in Rome, his compositions and his style now thoroughly Michelangelesque, Venetians continued to describe him as "ours," *nostro*. But anywhere in Italy is better than anywhere else: if only Albrecht Dürer "had been born in Italy [...] he would not have been inferior to anyone."¹¹ Interwoven with such personal, regional, and national rivalries are the rivalries of competing theories or doctrines: the *paragone*, notably the rivalry of painting and poetry, painting and sculpture; and the gendered rivalries of style, that is, masculine *disegno* (drawing) and feminine *colorito* (the expressive use of color).

Men of letters debated yet another kind of stylistic rivalry concerning the emulation of models in writing, a discourse with implications for artists as well. Should an author — or an artist — imitate one model or many? The Florentine Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola endorsed the imitation of numerous models in a letter to Pietro Bembo dated September 1512: "I say that one must imitate all the good writers, not only one, and not in everything."¹² Such multiple imitation is explicitly bound to the hope, or expectation, of eclipsing one's predecessors. "You may emulate and also surpass in every argument the invention transmitted by others," Pico declared; "you may compose better, also discuss [the invention] with greater elegance."¹³ Replying to Pico on 1 January 1513, Bembo agreed that one should of course strive to outdo one's exemplar but warned against such blatant eclecticism: "It would be as though you thought it possible, in constructing a single palace, to reproduce textually many models of conception and diverse execution."¹⁴ The author should imitate only one model and embrace him completely: "we should imitate the one who is best of all" — namely Cicero — and "Who wishes to deserve the name of imitator [...] must reproduce the totality of the style of his model."¹⁵

Michelangelo may be seen as the "Ciceronian" model for the visual arts of his time, as Giotto had been for an earlier age.¹⁶ From early in his career, Michelangelo had cast himself in this central role, manipulating public perception of himself as the great master of his age. He achieved this desideratum by means that seem modern, a kind of public relations campaign, sometimes embellishing the truth and sometimes bending it. Michelangelo was certainly bending (or breaking) the truth, for example, when he denied practical knowledge of painting before the Sistine ceiling. In reality, he had completed at least one panel (the Doni *Madonna*) and had trained in the Ghirlandaio shop for

approximately two years – a fact Michelangelo ignored in his own writings (including a sonnet written while he was at work on the ceiling) and eventually sought to deny through his authorized biography by Ascanio Condivi, published in 1553. Similarly disingenuous were assertions that Michelangelo worked alone.¹⁷ And Michelangelo's contemporaries colluded with him by acknowledging, tacitly or explicitly, his genius and his primacy. But the fundamental reason for the success of his propaganda campaign was that, for all his machinations, Michelangelo was utterly truthful about one thing, the fundamental thing: his great teachers were nature and classical antiquity. Throughout his career, he remained indebted principally to them – and to himself. More than any of his contemporaries in a remarkably self-aware generation, Michelangelo remained self-referential.

The self-consciousness of sixteenth-century artists and patrons seems unprecendented even by their own recent past, finding an antecedent in fabled antiquity, notably in the figures of Apelles and his patron, Alexander the Great. These great personages were seen as prototypes and rivals to be surpassed by present-day artists and patrons. Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century masters might be extolled as "New Apelles," including Fra Angelico in the Latin epigraph of his tomb in Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome: "Let me not be given praises because I have been like another Apelles but because I gave all my earnings, O Christ, to thine."¹⁸ But later masters hope to excel Apelles, and Bellini, for one, was said to have done so. Had they been contemporaries, Alexander would have chosen "not Apelles but Bellini," according to the poet Niccolò Liburnio, writing in 1502.¹⁹ Vasari made an even greater assertion for Michelangelo, declaring that no work, past or present, ever exceeded Michelangelo's in painting and sculpture. And Cellini claimed the laurels for himself, informing readers of his *Autobiography* that his various works have no equal, ancient or modern – and moreover, he had François I, Duke Cosimo de' Medici, and even Michelangelo say as much: "Who was this master who has portrayed you so well and with such a beautiful style [*con sì bella maniera*]?" Cellini's Michelangelo inquires of Bindo Altoviti. "And know that this head pleases me as much and better than anything that the ancients did, and to be sure, there are some beautiful things of theirs to be seen."²⁰ (Michelangelo then advises Altoviti on how better to display his bust given the room's ambient lighting.) Whether Michelangelo admired Cellini's work in precisely these words is beside the point. Favorable comparison with antiquity had become the "classic" encomium, a trope perhaps all the more significant for its repetition. And Michelangelo's judgment had become gospel.

By the mid-sixteenth century, when Cellini was writing his *Autobiography*, such authors as Vasari and Dolce began to write new kinds of literature on art. Cellini's life was not printed until 1728, but Vasari, Dolce, and others wrote for publication, and their works were readily available to artists and their patrons. Writing of rivalries, these texts engaged in rivalries of their own: in 1548 Paolo Pino rushed his *Dialogo di pittura* into print, prompted in part by competition with Benedetto Varchi's *Due lezioni*, presented in 1547 (though

not published until 1550), and in part by the desire to "scoop" Vasari's first edition.²¹ Condivi's biography of Michelangelo was intended to emend and supplant Vasari's first *Life of the master*; Vasari's second edition in 1568 responded to this challenge and also, in a more general way, to Dolce's *Dialogue on Painting* (the *Aretino*), published in 1557, that is, to the rivalries of style and of *disegno* as opposed to *colorito*. (Not coincidentally, the second edition of Vasari's *Lives* includes his autobiography.) Cellini's *Autobiography* records his triumphs over hated rivals; Varchi's *Lezioni* reiterate the rivalries of the *paragone* of painting and sculpture; in their poetry, Pietro Aretino, Michelangelo, and Agnolo Bronzino, among others, address the *paragone* of literature and the visual arts.

Giving voice to the rivalries of men and ideas that characterized the art of their time, such authors made rivalry a leitmotif of writing about art, its making, and its acquisition. The subjects of Vasari's *Lives*, for example, find rivalry everywhere, sometimes recognizing it even where it did not exist, or at least not to such a degree as the author would have his readers believe. In one notorious case, he exaggerated its force to deadly extremes, falsely accusing a murderously jealous Andrea del Castagno of slaying Domenico Veneziano.²² Yet Vasari also extolled nonviolent artistic rivalry as a bloodless revolution culminating in the triumph of his hero, Michelangelo. From now on, Vasari proclaimed, any artist should learn from two masters: nature and art – preferably the art of Michelangelo. In Dolce's *Dialogue on Painting*, proxies for the Venetian and Central Italian schools acclaim the achievements of Raphael, Michelangelo, and Titian, ultimately asserting Titian's superiority. Like many other Renaissance dialogues – and indeed like Plato's – Dolce's dialogue is agonistic.²³ The Venetian advocate in the *Dialogue* is Aretino himself, recently deceased but well known as one of Titian's closest friends and his greatest publicist, in several volumes of letters and poetry.²⁴ (Aretino was also a former admirer of Michelangelo, who had become one of his most acerbic critics.) Vasari recognized Aretino's extraordinary role in Titian's career, describing in his *Life of the artist* how "Aretino, the very celebrated poet of our times, became the greatest friend [. . . and] was of great honor and use to Titian, because he made him known as far as the reach of his pen, and especially to princes of importance."²⁵

Renaissance patrons similarly became rivals in sacred and public arenas. In the domestic sphere, competitiveness was reified in the studio or camerino, a retreat where a collector might enjoy his or her collection and vaunt its treasures to visitors. And like their guild, civic, and ecclesiastical counterparts, such patrons invested not only money but gave considerable thought to their acquisitions. In 1502, for example, Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga, contemplating the purchase of one or two vases from the collection of Lorenzo de' Medici, exchanged at least ten letters with their agent in Florence, had drawings made to supplement his descriptions of the vases, and then remade to scale and in color, and had him consult Leonardo da Vinci regarding their possible acquisition (did Leonardo also provide the second set of drawings?).

Leonardo preferred the jasper vase, Isabella the crystal, and sure of her own judgment, this was the one she offered to buy with a payment in woolen textiles. The deal collapsed, however, when the sellers rejected her valuation of these goods.²⁶

These various Renaissance rivalries among patrons, collectors, artists, and authors culminate in the persons of Michelangelo and Titian, Michelangelo's last and most enduring rival. Acting with them in this drama are Leonardo, Giorgione, Raphael, Sebastiano, Cellini, and Bandinelli, among others. Patrons too play their parts: Julius II della Rovere and the Medici popes Leo X and Clement VII, and private collectors such as the Este. Reporting these rivalries, while engaging in their own, are such authors as Aretino, Condivi, and Vasari. But always at the center is Michelangelo, the protagonist whose art makes its maker "more than angel, divine."²⁷

3

Paragoni

I do not wish to approach the *paragone*, so as to avoid comparisons which are always odious.

Lodovico Dolce¹

I can execute sculpture in marble, in bronze, and in terracotta, likewise in painting, whatever can be done, in a *paragone* with every one.

Leonardo da Vinci²

THE LIFE OF LEONARDO DA VINCI introduces Vasari's third, modern age of the arts. Born illegitimate on 15 April 1452, Leonardo evidently entered Andrea del Verrocchio's shop in 1469. Given his age in 1469, Leonardo must have had previous training, though his experience with Verrocchio proved decisive. His companions there included Lorenzo di Credi and three associates who were later favored by Sixtus IV: Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, and Perugino. Rivalry is inherent in the structure of a Renaissance studio, involving a group of young men seeking to please their master, thereby competing with each other and, eventually, with the master himself. The environment of Verrocchio's studio was perhaps more rivalrous than most precisely because of the remarkable constellation of young artists working there. Vasari's description of the relationship among three of them epitomizes the studio psychology of camaraderie, imitation, and rivalry. Lorenzo di Credi had joined Verrocchio's studio, and "under him, having for his companions and friends Pietro Perugino and Leonardo da Vinci, even though they were rivals, devoted all diligence to painting. And because the style [*maniera*] of Leonardo was enormously pleasing to Lorenzo, and he knew how to imitate so well that there was no one who, in the clarity and finish of the work, diligently imitated Leonardo better than Lorenzo did."³ The rivalries of Verrocchio's studio were passed on to the next generation: Ghirlandaio became the master of Michelangelo, Leonardo's greatest competitor; and Perugino, the teacher of Raphael, Leonardo's greatest "follower."

No other Renaissance shop in Central Italy seems to have employed a more extraordinary cohort than Verrocchio – not Antonio del Pollaiuolo,

Verrocchio's own principal competitor in Florence; not Leonardo, despite his vast influence on the younger generation; not Raphael, whose large studio produced only one great successor, namely Giulio Romano; and certainly not Michelangelo, famously, or infamously, without students of any distinction. (The closest parallel with Verrocchio's shop is found in Venice, in Giovanni Bellini's studio, a vast enterprise and the training ground for Giorgione and Titian, among others.)

Enrolled in the Florentine Compagnia di San Luca (the painters' guild) in 1472, and therefore an independent master at age twenty, Leonardo was still living in Verrocchio's house in 1476 – a fact documented by anonymous accusations of sodomy against him. (The sodomy charges were later dismissed, evidently an indication of Leonardo's having friends in high places, among them Lorenzo de' Medici.) Leonardo's earliest documented independent commission dates from two years later, an altarpiece for the Chapel of Saint Bernard in the Palazzo della Repubblica, for which he received his first payment in March 1478.⁴ Despite the prestige of the commission, Leonardo never fulfilled his contract.

In March 1481, undeterred by Leonardo's apparent failure to satisfy the Signoria, the monastic church of San Donato a Scopeto (outside Florence) turned to him for their high altarpiece, to represent the Adoration of the Magi. Leonardo received partial payment for the San Donato commission in September of that year. He eventually reneged on this contract as well, producing only the underpainting (Fig. 15). Although the *Adoration of the Magi* remained unfinished, it has always been admired for its "many beautiful things," in Vasari's words.⁵ Its influence is incalculable, and indeed to a large degree due precisely to its being incomplete. Had Leonardo finished it, using the palette of his approximately contemporary paintings such as the *Madonna of the Carnation* or *Madonna with a Vase of Flowers* (Fig. 16), his colors would have masked some of the *Adoration's* more original compositional and psychological elements. To put the matter another way, which the painting's first viewers would also have understood: without color, the *Adoration* is all the more remarkable than it would have been with color, because one sees its unfamiliar qualities unmediated by Leonardo's chromaticism, still for the most part traditional in 1482.

The painting's stylistic innovations are bound to its technique. Elsewhere, Leonardo used cartoons and *spoliero* to transfer compositions from paper to panel; traces of the dots from this process are visible in the portrait of *Ginevra de' Benci*, for example, painted c. 1474–76, and the *Cecilia Gallerani* or *Lady with the Ermine*, c. 1488–90 (Figs. 11, 12).⁶ There are no such indications in the *Adoration*, however, though one might expect that the complexity of the composition would have required a cartoon. Leonardo made sketches of individual figures and elements of the scene, a number of which survive. But the composition itself was painted, and repainted, directly on the panel: *pentimenti* testify to the freedom and confidence of Leonardo's technique.⁷

For present-day viewers, one sign of the *Adoration's* modernity is the absence of obvious supernatural markers, such as halos or adoring angels – elements that other masters, including Bellini and Michelangelo, were unwilling to relinquish. (The omission of halos is not a matter of the painting's being incomplete; halos are also absent from Leonardo's other sacred works.) However "advanced" Leonardo's exclusion may now seem, one must remember that contemporaries and successors did not always follow his example in this regard. In any case, in the *Adoration*, the primary indication of the identity of Mary and Christ is of course precisely the fact of their being adored – adored, moreover, by perhaps the most psychologically and physically varied company of worshippers ever represented in Christian art. These are the heads that Vasari particularly admired. In the *Adoration*, each character's inner life is expressed in his appearance, demeanor, and action – that is, in Renaissance terms, each personage embodies the principle of decorum.

Leonardo himself defined his purpose and his achievement in his notebooks, explaining that the best figures are those whose actions clearly express their emotions so that the beholder can understand them: "Painted figures must be done in such a way that the spectators are able with ease to recognize through their attitudes the thoughts of their minds (*il concetto dell'anima*)."⁸ The psychological sophistication and physiological variety of the *Adoration* makes the emotional sameness of most other late fifteenth-century works look like a failure of imagination.⁹

The acuity of Leonardo's psychological observation is one of his greatest accomplishments and characteristic of his work from the beginning (his angel in Verrocchio's *Baptism of Christ* is identifiable as Leonardo's as much by one's sense of the angel's personality as by the style in which he is painted). More important than symbolic devices or the narrative situation is Leonardo's visualization of the sanctity of Mother and Child in their faces and demeanor. In her maternal emotion, she recalls but transcends her predecessors in works by Verrocchio and by Desiderio da Settignano. Surpassing his models, Leonardo individualizes Mary and Christ in ways that may have seemed startling to contemporaries and still surprise beholders today. In the Benois *Madonna*, evidently begun in 1478, Leonardo adapts elements of the Infant's pose from a relief by Desiderio, but now shows the Virgin laughing at her Child's awkward attempts to grasp the flowers, symbolic of his Passion (Figs. 13, 14). Is her laughter simple amusement at his clumsy action, or an expression of her joy in its inherent promise of redemption for humankind?¹⁰

It is this psychology or spirituality that distinguishes Leonardo's Mary from those by Desiderio and Verrocchio, whom she otherwise resembles in her facial type, coiffure, and drapery patterns of her garments. At the same time, Leonardo provided his own sculptural models for his paintings, making figures which he clothed in fabric dampened with gesso and molded into volumetric patterns. His painted figures simulate the three-dimensionality of these models. The *paragone* of painting and sculpture was thus in Leonardo's



11 Leonardo da Vinci. *Cinvera de' Benci*. Panel. Washington, National Gallery of Art, Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund.

practice and his thoughts, if not yet in his vocabulary, from the beginning of his career as a painter.¹¹

That the painter Leonardo should have borrowed figure types from sculptors in conceiving his early Madonna paintings is not surprising, given his association with Verrocchio's shop. Yet the debt is noteworthy as the first appearance of a leitmotif in Leonardo's art and thought, namely his concern with the mimetic qualities of painting which allow the simulation of the volumetric qualities of sculpture, what he later termed *rilievo*. Precisely this sense of volume distinguishes his early Madonnas from their marble prototypes: remarkably, the paintings seem more plastic than the sculptures that inspired them. What seems to have begun as Leonardo's borrowing of sculptural



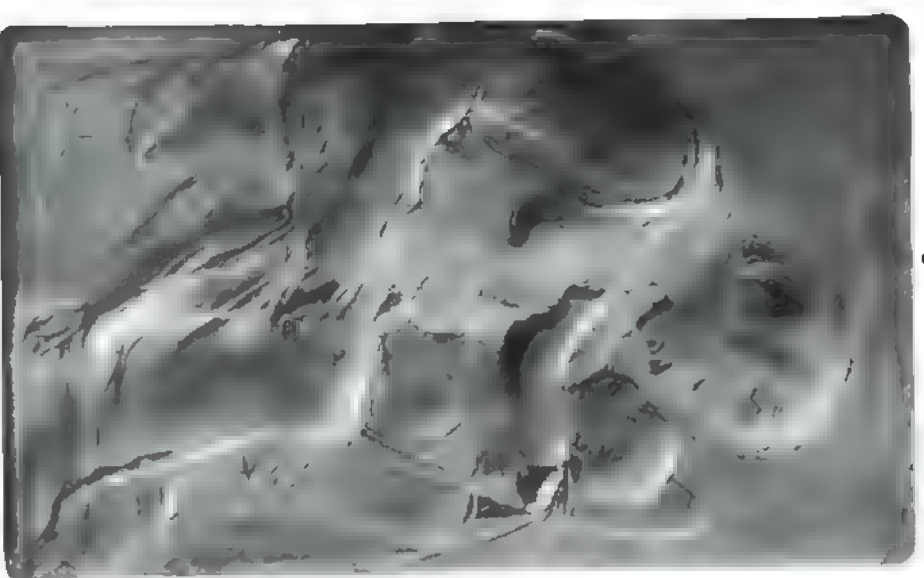
12 Leonardo da Vinci. *Cecilia Gallerani* (Lady with the Ermine). Panel. Kraków, Czartoryski Collection.



13 Leonardo da Vinci.
Benois Madonna. Panel
transferred to canvas.
Saint Petersburg,
Hermitage Museum.

motifs led to his invention of a new style of painting that rivals the three-dimensionality of sculpture. Theory quickly followed practice, as Leonardo began to articulate his conception of *rilievo* in his notebooks of the 1480s, identifying the simulation of three-dimensional relief as the painter's primary concern. "*Rilievo*," he declared, "is [. . .] the soul of painting"; it can be achieved by subordinating light and ultimately color to shadow: "Shadow is of greater power than light, in that it can impede and entirely deprive bodies of light."¹² Depriving bodies of light, shadow can therefore also deprive them of color. The eventual result was the subjugation of local color by a unifying system of modeling in which all darkest shadows become black, and all lightest highlights white – in a word, *chiaroscuro*.

By virtue of being a monochromatic underpainting, the *Adoration* anticipates the treatment of color, light, and shadow in Leonardo's later thought and works. If the effect is accidental or coincidental in this unfinished work, in other



14 Desiderio da
Settignano. *Madonna and
Child*. Marble. London,
Victoria and Albert
Museum.

respects, Leonardo's revolutionary intentions in the *Adoration* are clear. First, he simplified, hence monumentalized, Mary's figure: he abandoned both her elaborately braided coiffure and the complicated pattern of drapery folds employed in the first Madonna paintings, which now look fussy by comparison. Mary's round face in the *Madonna of the Carnation* becomes oval in the *Adoration* and seems more mature, less girlish, especially compared with the childlike Mother of the Benois *Madonna*.

The Christ in the *Adoration*, looking very much like the same Infant though somewhat less robust, is more adult in his gestures, blessing with the right hand, reaching purposefully to accept the oldest Magus's gift with the left. As in the Madonna paintings, here too Leonardo asserts a gendered psychological and intellectual hierarchy that privileges Christ: he responds to the present situation, she responds only to him. The cognitive differentiation of Mary and Christ in the Madonna paintings is the prelude for Leonardo's distinction of



15 Leonardo da Vinci. *Adoration of the Magi*. Panel. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

personalities and psychologies in the large cast of characters who populate the *Adoration*.

The *Adoration* is organized according to geometrical principles, Mary and Christ forming a pyramid flanked by the circular formation of worshippers. The pyramidal composition was not Leonardo's invention, as Meyer Schapiro explained; but "Compared with old types, the novelty of Leonardo's form, later carried further by Michelangelo and Raphael, lies rather in the fact that within the conventional pyramid of three or four figures, each has a complex asymmetry of contrasted forms in depth, [..] and each person responds actively to another." In addition, Schapiro continued, Leonardo's "great originality as a painter" is seen in the "new fullness and subtlety of modelling, a palpable atmosphere, a mysterious light and shadow [..], and the infinitely extended landscape background as a lyrical revelation of mood in counterpoint to the figures."¹³



16 Leonardo da Vinci. *Madonna of the Carnation* (*Madonna with a Vase of Flowers*). Panel. Munich, Alte Pinakothek.

Perhaps no painting – and certainly no unfinished work – had ever exerted greater influence than Leonardo's *Adoration*. Other compositions had been greatly admired and much copied, such as the Doryphoros of Polykleitos, the statue that established the Canon of classical proportions for the heroic male nude, or the Venus Pudica of Praxiteles, which established a canonical posture or action for the beautiful female nude. Similarly, certain sacred, presumably miraculous, images were frequently replicated, including Madonnas attributed to Saint Luke and images of the *Veronica* (meaning "true image," *vera icon*), the veil imprinted with the face of Jesus. But Leonardo's *Adoration* was influential not only, and not principally, for individual facial types and expressions or its composition or its particular motifs – the way in which a horse rears, for example, or the way one man turns to address another. Its great impact was less precise and more profound, changing the ways in which artists and their audiences thought about the conception of individuals, their interrelationships in compositions, their enactment of narrative – even when the individuals do not look like Leonardo's personages, when they are deployed differently and engaged in different actions. In this broader sense, the *Adoration* is central to the history of Renaissance art. Like his classical predecessors, Leonardo established a canon influencing High Renaissance ideas of characterization, composition, and narrative. Seeing the *Adoration*, no artist – and equally important, no discerning patron – would be satisfied in future by an undifferentiated cast of characters, however attractive; or by a rigid composition, however well ordered; or by a mechanistic narrative, however coherent.¹⁴ Artists were now challenged to create, and the beholder to expect, an unfolding drama enacted by completely realized individuals who engage one's interest and invite an empathetic response. Leonardo himself must have been aware of his revolutionary achievement. Yet he abandoned both the *Adoration of the Magi* and the altarpiece for the Chapel of Saint Bernard to go north to Milan just as his compatriots were traveling south to Rome.

Leonardo left for Milan in late 1481 or early 1482.¹⁵ The ostensible purpose of the trip was to deliver a *lira da braccio* to Lodovico il Moro, a gift from his Medici friend and ally, Lorenzo il Magnifico.¹⁶ Lorenzo had already befriended Leonardo, permitting him to study the antiquities displayed in the Medici Palace gardens (where ten years later Michelangelo enjoyed similar privileges). Dispatching Leonardo to Milan with the *lira*, perhaps Lorenzo was responding to a request by Leonardo himself for an elegant entrée to the Sforza court.¹⁷

Leaving little if anything to chance, Leonardo also invited himself, or asked to be invited, advertising his ingenuity in a letter to il Moro, citing various abilities from arms to sculpture – and mentioning painting almost in passing. Undated and unsigned, and with several corrections and emendations, the text preserved in Leonardo's Codex Atlanticus is evidently a draft of the letter; its orthography and abbreviations are unusual for him; and written left to right, it does not resemble his customary handwriting, written right to left. Even so, the draft reflects Leonardo's thoughts: no matter who wrote it, its contents are

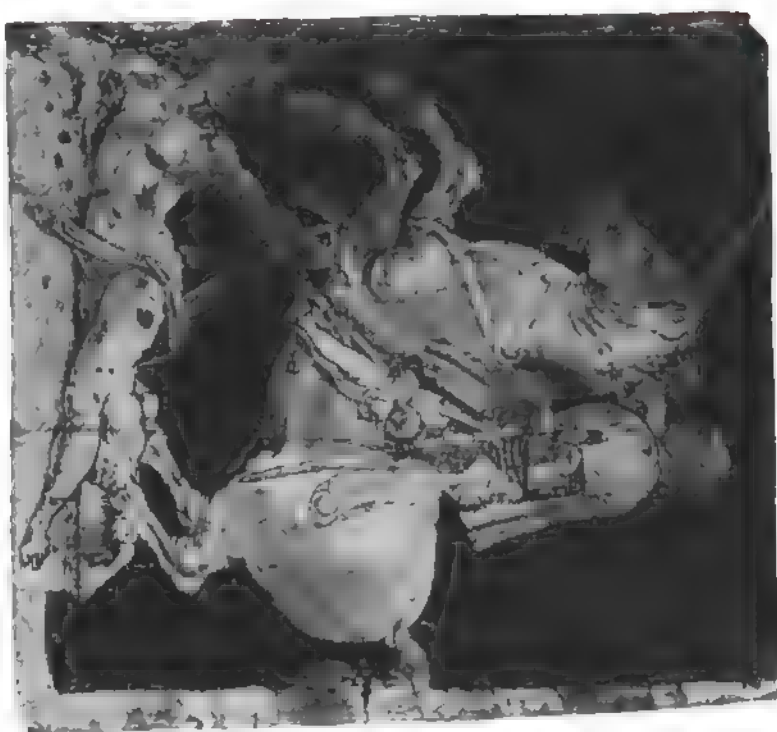
authentic.¹⁸ This was not the first letter addressed by an artist to a possible patron. In 1438, for example, Domenico Veneziano had written to ~~Beato~~ de' Medici (Lorenzo il Magnifico's father), similarly seeking employment.¹⁹ But Leonardo's letter is arguably the most wide-ranging and least formulaic of such missives.

Referring to Lodovico's primary concerns as Leonardo understood them, the letter begins with the artist's skills in constructing instruments of war quite unlike those commonly in use. He can design portable bridges, convenient for pursuit of the enemy – and for flight, if necessary; he can drain trenches, destroy fortresses, and in general make himself useful in times of war. In times of peace, too, Leonardo can give the greatest satisfaction, comparable with – *al paragone di* – every other master of architecture and hydraulics. He can make sculpture in marble, bronze, and clay. And finally, Leonardo can also paint as well as any rival: he "can do everything in the art of painting that can be done, in comparison with – *a paragone di* – everyone and anyone else."²⁰

The word "paragone" appears in these two sequential paragraphs in the letter, about peace-time architecture and about sculpture and painting. Thus repeating "paragone," Leonardo signaled his readiness to compare himself, favorably – not to say, victoriously – with others. This use of "paragone," meaning comparison, with rivals named or, as in this instance, unnamed, was familiar to fifteenth-century Italians. (Isabella d'Este and Giovanni Bellini used it in much the same way.) When Leonardo and his contemporaries used the word "paragone," they meant it in this sense of rivalrous comparison of *artists* or their works; only later did the term come to refer primarily to the rivalrous comparison of the *arts*. Even so, it is not wishful thinking, or reading, to see in Leonardo's use of "paragone" in his letter an anticipation of this later usage; at the very least, the word announces his competitive ambitions.

Leonardo's only mention of painting is the last part of the sentence about his knowledge of *sculpture* in various media. In the context of expansive boastfulness about his every other skill, such reticence about painting seems inexplicable, unless we understand that by using the word "paragone," Leonardo says everything that needs to be said about his gifts as a painter. Given the self-confident tone of the letter, and his detailed enumeration of his other skills, Leonardo's terseness about painting may also reflect his belief that he had already proved himself in that arena.

If Leonardo's reticence about his experience in painting may be seen as an understatement expressing self-assurance, his description of his other talents is tinged with braggadocio. His assertion of experience with bronze casting cannot be dismissed as false advertising, however. Having apprenticed in Verrocchio's shop, Leonardo would have witnessed, and presumably participated in, the making of sculpture in stone and in bronze.²¹ Among the works he took with him to Milan, Leonardo listed "a narrative of the Passion made in relief," *fatta in forma*, perhaps an example of his own efforts in sculpture.²² Even so, Leonardo's characterizations of his abilities seem to be in inverse proportion to his actual experience.



Leonardo had a particular purpose in mind in vaunting his abilities as a sculptor: he wanted the commission for the bronze equestrian monument being planned for Lodovico's late father, Duke Francesco. The Sforza equestrian monument might be safely entrusted to him, Leonardo assured Lodovico: "one could undertake the bronze horse which will be immortal glory and eternal honor of the happy memory of the lord your father and of the illustrious house of Sforza."

Knowing of the monument, Leonardo was perforce aware that the Sforza had already discussed the commission with other artists. In 1472 Lodovico's elder brother, Duke Galeazzo Maria, had hired the Mantegazza brothers Cristoforo and Antonio to design the statue and in the following year had begun searching for a bronze caster. Lodovico abandoned this design, however, and evidently discussed the project with the Florentine painter-sculptor Antonio del Pollaiuolo.²³ Milanese interest in Pollaiuolo may have been particularly galling to Verrocchio, who had produced the decorations for Galeazzo's triumphal entry into Florence in 1471, possibly assisted by Leonardo. Pollaiuolo's study for the Sforza monument is dated c. 1481, that is, at the time of Leonardo's move to Milan (Fig. 17). Clearly the commission was not Leonardo's "for the asking," no matter how assertive the request; but once in Milan, he began to



17 (facing page) Antonio del Pollaiuolo. Study for the Sforza monument. Pen and brown ink with brown wash. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection.

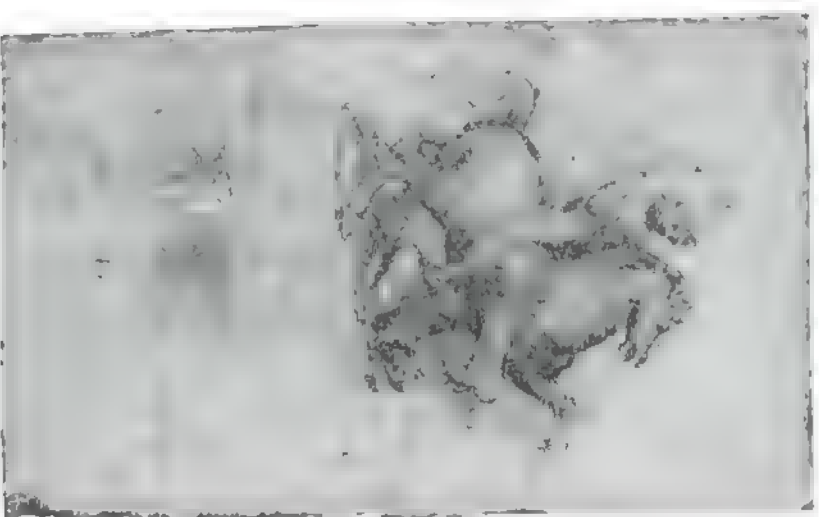
18 Andrea del Verrocchio. Colleoni. Bronze. Venice, Campo di Santi Giovanni e Paolo.

produce drawings for the statue, while no more was heard, or seen, of Pollaiuolo's project. Lodovico was presumably discussing the monument with Leonardo in the early 1480s, then, though the first written reference to his actually working on it comes only in 1489.²⁴

Meanwhile, if Verrocchio had indeed been passed over by the Sforza, he had been successful in a similar enterprise, or very nearly so, completing before his death in summer 1488 the model for the equestrian monument of Bartolomeo Colleoni in Venice. Recalling the contest for the Florentine Baptistery doors, the commission was the result of a formal competition open to *forestieri* as well as citizens of the Venetian Republic. A decree of the Senate dated 30 July 1479 documents the contest, naming three *operai* to fulfill Colleoni's testamentary bequest for his monument (Fig. 18).²⁵ By summer 1481 their competition had led to the production of at least one of three documented entries, a life-size model of the horse evidently made with fabric stiffened with gesso.²⁶ Another entry was done in terracotta, its maker now also unknown. Verrocchio's winning model was made of wax.²⁷ His likely competitors may have included two fellow Florentines: his longstanding rival, Pollaiuolo; and Leonardo himself, who was already intellectually engaged in a comparable commission for the Sforza monument, if not yet under contract.



The public contest for the *Colleoni* and the private competition for the Sforza monument, involving at least the Mantegazza brothers and then Pollaiuolo, provide the context for Leonardo's maneuverings to win the Milanese commission. The self-assured tone of Leonardo's letter to Lodovico was determined as much by his appreciation of the practical realities of this highly competitive situation as by his awareness – or embrace – of the agon with his rivals. His work for the Sforza monument, and later, his equally abortive attempt to execute the equestrian monument of Gian Giacomo Trivulzio (1511), obsessed Leonardo for much of his career, much as Michelangelo's failure to complete his tomb for Julius II was to obsess *him*. Like Michelangelo, who was characteristically more voluble in explaining his motivations and frustrations, Leonardo conceived the Sforza monument (and later the Trivulzio) as commemorations of his own genius as much or more as commemorations of their ostensible subjects (Fig. 19).²⁸ In itself, this represents a stunning reversal of centuries, perhaps millennia, of thinking about works of art, and in particular, funerary and other commemorative monuments. When Michelangelo later described the aborted plans for the tomb of Julius II as a "tragedy," he meant *his* tragedy, not the pope's.²⁹ Leonardo did not record his eventual disappoint-



19 (facing page)
Leonardo da Vinci. Study
for the Sforza monument.
Silverpoint. Windsor, Royal
Library 123584, Her Majesty
Queen Elizabeth II.

20 Leonardo da Vinci.
Study for the Sforza
monument. (?) Black chalk.
Windsor, Royal Library
12354, Her Majesty Queen
Elizabeth II.

ments with the Sforza and Trivulzio equestrian monuments, but he can hardly have been indifferent about them, and certainly contemporaries saw these more as losses for Leonardo and indeed for Italian art than for their subjects.

As articulate as any written source, Leonardo's drawings and models trace the development of his conception of the Sforza monument.³⁰ The artist's ideas were endorsed by his patron, or perhaps merely tolerated, if the Florentine ambassador's report of Lodovico's views is to be believed. Writing to Lorenzo de' Medici about Leonardo's work on the project in 1489, the ambassador claimed that Lodovico "is not confident that he will succeed."³¹ It was evidently as much or more Leonardo's intention than his patron's that the Sforza monument outdo all its competitors, ancient and modern; Leonardo's ambitions, even more than Lodovico's dynastic dreams, that determined the conception of the monument. The kinds of desiderata that earlier patrons might require of their artists Leonardo now imposed on *himself*. Not only was the statue to be bigger, hence better, than other equestrian monuments: the horse was to rear on its hindlegs, with the forelegs resting on air. The classical bronze horses that everyone knew in late fifteenth-century Italy bent one foreleg to lift the hoof off the ground: thus in Rome, the mount of Marcus Aurelius (mistakenly

identified as Constantine); in Venice, the Quadriga of four horses taken from Constantinople to adorn the façade of San Marco; and in Pavia, the so-called *Regiole* (which Leonardo saw during a visit to Pavia in 1490, traveling with Francesco di Giorgio). But the horse of Donatello's *Gattamelata* in Padua, installed in 1453, rested its raised hoof on a small globe. Fifteenth-century masters had been able to replicate the ancient prancing pose only in media other than bronze, in fresco, for example, or in wood.³² The technical difficulties seemed insurmountable, but Pollaiuolo's drawing for the Sforza monument indicates that he planned to tackle the problem by providing a fallen enemy to support the rearing horse (Fig. 17). Whether Leonardo saw this sheet is unknown, though presumably the Sforza would have informed him of Pollaiuolo's ideas. In any case, Leonardo's drawings document his ever-increasing aspirations for the monument. First the horse props its rearing forelegs on a vanquished foe, as in Pollaiuolo's design; but then the supporting figure is moved, and the horse almost rears in air (Figs. 19, 20). That this cannot be easily done in bronze did not preclude Leonardo's wanting to do it. On the contrary, it was precisely the difficulty of the task that engaged him. Honoring Francesco Sforza, Leonardo would honor himself, with a conspicuous demonstration of his superiority to other sculptors. The full-scale clay horse that Leonardo completed in winter 1492-93 was displayed in Milan cathedral on the occasion of the marriage of Bianca Maria Sforza to Emperor Maximilian I. The model became enormously famous, admired by such men of letters as Paolo Giovio – but not, unfortunately, by the French soldiers who occupied Milan in 1499. Seeing in Leonardo's clay model a convenient target, Gascon archers reduced the horse to rubble.³³

The Sforza horse assured Leonardo's fame. Perugino, his contemporary, was already far more prolific than Leonardo, but Giovanni Santi (Raphael's father) paired them as equals in his rhyming *Chronicle* written in the early 1490s, and called Leonardo "divine."³⁴ With hindsight, Santi's encomium seems entirely justified, though Leonardo had done comparatively little to explain such appreciation by that date, and what little he had done was known to a comparatively small audience. The early 1490s means *before* the *Last Supper*, completed in Milan between 1494 and 1496; and *before* the great works of the second Florentine period: versions of the *Madonna and Child and Saint Anne*, *La Gioconda*, and the cartoon for the *Battle of Anghiari*.

A perspicacious critic but not clairvoyant, Santi could have based his opinion of Leonardo on the *Adoration Horse* for the Sforza monument, and such extravagant ephemera as the inventions for the Sforza-Aragon wedding in 1490, with seven rotating planets.³⁵ Had Santi actually seen any of these works or had he merely heard of them? Had he seen any of Leonardo's drawings? He cannot have read anything by Leonardo; though Leonardo planned to write several treatises, he never succeeded in completing any of them.³⁶

The mystery of Leonardo's early celebrity is greater than the mystery of Gioconda's smile. One thing is certain, however: Leonardo himself was largely

responsible for this manipulation of public opinion. As practiced by Leonardo and thereafter, such manipulation could take the form of published letters, chronicles, and treatises, as well as unpublished correspondence and discourse among patrons and *cognoscenti*. Such conversations are imagined (or remembered) in Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, and such correspondence is exemplified by Isabella d'Este's *carteggi*. Writing to Fra Pietro da Novellara in Florence on 27 March 1501, for example, the marchesa expressed her interest in Leonardo's latest doings and her desire to have a work by him. Learning from her dealings with Bellini, Isabella was willing to leave the choice of subject to Leonardo, though she suggested a theme appropriate to his style:

If Leonardo the Florentine painter is now there in Florence, we pray [you] wish to inform yourself what his life is, that is, whether he has begun some work, because some report of it has been made, and what work this is, and if you believe that he must remain there for some time, then sounding him out about whether he would undertake the business of making a painting in our studio which, when he be content to do so, we shall defer to him about the subject [*inventione*] and the timing, but when you find him reluctant, see at least about inducing him to do a little picture of the Madonna, holy and sweet as is his natural manner [*suo naturale*]. Then you will beg him to wish to send another sketch [*schizzo*] of our portrait because our Illustrious Lord and consort has given away the one that he left here.³⁷

Replying to the marchesa's breathless letter on 3 April 1501, Fra Pietro reported that Leonardo was at work on a painting of the *Anna Meterza*, that is, the *Madonna and Child and Saint Anne*, which the friar then described to her.³⁸

Isabella's knowing about the cartoon from her correspondent, and Novellara's knowing the work itself, having seen it in Leonardo's studio, help explain the artist's fame among his contemporaries: Leonardo was generous. He made his ideas readily available, even ideas about works in progress (including the *Saint Anne*), so that their impact was immediate, often – as in this case – preceding their completion. Vasari confirms what Novellara's letter implies about Leonardo's open door policy: "he made a cartoon with Our Lady and a Saint Anne with Christ, which not only amazed all the craftsmen [*artefici*] but, for two days after it was finished, men and women kept coming to see it, the young and the old, as one goes to solemn feasts, to see the marvels of Leonardo, which amazed all those people."³⁹ Similarly, *La Gioconda* was displayed though still unfinished in 1504-06, and in consequence changed the conception of portraiture for Raphael and other masters. Clearly, Leonardo followed his own advice to welcome visitors, and their suggestions: "while a man is painting he should not refuse anyone's judgement [but] be eager to lend a patient ear to the opinions of others."⁴⁰ This openness meant that such "amazed" visitors as Lorenzo da Pavia, Isabella's agent in Venice, might become Leonardo's publicists.⁴¹ It meant that even those who had never seen his works seem to have known of Leonardo and to have understood that his achievement

was somehow extraordinary. (The paradigm here is Apelles, Zeuxis, or the other fabled masters of antiquity – famous even in the absence of their works.) Leonardo's fame made him an exemplar for other masters but also a natural rival. And we have seen that Leonardo himself had anticipated, or invited, this kind of rivalrous confrontation, describing himself in his letter to il Moro "a *paragone* of everyone else." Perhaps it was more than coincidence, then, that Leonardo found himself in a competition staged by Lodovico's sister-in-law, Isabella d'Este, using very nearly that same turn of phrase.

In 1498, two years after Isabella's initial request to Giovanni Bellini and while she continued her negotiations with him, the marchesa staged a competition of his portraits with Leonardo's. More precisely, she wanted to confront Leonardo's portrait of Cecilia Gallerani with works by Bellini that she had just now been able to examine (Fig. 12).⁴² Portrait *paragone* were an Este family tradition, starting with Marchese Lionello's competition between Pisanello and Jacopo Bellini in 1441.⁴³ Isabella's choice of Leonardo and Bellini as contestants may seem obvious but in fact requires explanation. Bellini had been painting portraits for at least a quarter of a century when Isabella sought to juxtapose his portraiture with Leonardo's. Indeed, Bellini was the portraitist that Alexander himself would have chosen over Apelles, had they been contemporaries, as Niccolò Liburnio's sonnet announced.⁴⁴ Elsewhere, Liburnio praised Bellini as "among the other masters worthy of immortality" in a poem included in *Le seilente*, published in Venice in 1513 with a dedication to Isabella d'Este.⁴⁵ Another humanist poet, Baccio Ziliotto, also made the comparison between Bellini and Apelles as portraitists.⁴⁶ Compared with Bellini, however, Leonardo was a portrait novice in 1498. The only portrait universally attributed to Leonardo which precedes the *Cecilia* is *Ginevra de' Benci*, c. 1474. Leonardo's *Ginevra*, probably the most famous portrait ever painted, was not yet in existence; and the *Portrait of a Musician* in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana of Milan, a work of the late 1480s or early 1490s, would have been an unlikely or unsuitable example of his portraiture for Isabella's purposes, given the gender and the social class of the subject, and the way in which he presents his music for the beholder's information and approbation.⁴⁷ The marchesa might have found *La Belle Ferronnière* of more interest as a more recent example of Leonardo's work, c. 1496, assuming that she knew of it (Fig. 21). The sister has been tentatively identified as Lucrezia Crivelli, one of Lodovico's paramours whose portrait Leonardo is known to have painted.⁴⁸ There is no evidence that Isabella knew any of these works, however, and in any case, it was the *Cecilia Gallerani* that particularly interested her. Gallerani (1473–1536) was another of Lodovico's former mistresses, but this amorous past did not interfere with Isabella's asking a favor of her.⁴⁹

Whatever combination of perspicacity, avarice, or obsession with portraiture (and especially portraits of herself) may have inspired Isabella's interest in Leonardo as a portraitist and her curiosity regarding the *Cecilia*, the marchesa was not satisfied with having heard descriptions of the portrait: Isabella wanted to see it (again?) for herself. In a letter dated 26 April 1498 Isabella requested Cecilia to lend her portrait by Leonardo:



21 Leonardo da Vinci. *La Belle Ferronnière*. Panel. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Having happened today to have seen certain beautiful portraits by the hand of Giovanni Bellini, we have entered into discourse about the works of Leonardo, with the desire to see them *al paragone* with those that we have, and recalling that he has portrayed you from the life, we pray you [...] that you be so kind as to send this your portrait [...] so that in addition to its giving satisfaction in the *paragone*, we shall also most willingly see your face.⁵⁰

It is possible that Isabella had seen Leonardo's portrait during a visit to Milan in 1495, but nothing in the letter confirms this. In any case, she now wanted to see it in *paragone* with Bellini's portraits. In her letter Isabella alluded to the common suppositions that a portrait is a likeness of its subject and that such a likeness may function as the proxy for that subject. And she repeated the idea, inherent in the Renaissance concepts of *imitatio* and rivalry, that works of art must be seen in juxtaposition, that is, *al paragone*. Such comparisons were in the air.⁵¹ Recalling Isabella's juxtaposition of Bellini and Leonardo, for example, Ambrogio Calepino compares the two masters in his definition of *Pingo* in his *Dictionarium*, first published in 1502. Mantegna is also mentioned again (presumably unintentionally) echoing Isabella in her desire to compare him with Bellini.⁵² Cecilia's portrait was lent, and Isabella returned it a month later.⁵³

Lodovico's marriage to Beatrice d'Este, Isabella's sister, in January 1491 had been followed by the marriage of Cecilia and Ludovico Visconti Bergamini in the following year – a marriage arranged by il Moro, after Cecilia had given birth to il Moro's son, Cesare, on 3 May 1491. Cecilia's portrait antedates this protracted "double wedding" by one or two years, dating between 1488 and 1490, when Beatrice was still a shadow on the horizon. It has frequently been noted that the prehensile ermine embraced by Cecilia in her portrait is a pun on the name Gallerani in Greek, which also suggests "white," the color of the creature (*gal* means "milk"). As everyone knew – including Leonardo, who recorded the fact in one of his notebooks and in a drawing – the ermine prefers (in Leonardo's words) "to be captured by hunters rather than take refuge in a muddy lair, in order not to stain its purity."⁵⁴ Leonardo was echoing the motto of the noble Neapolitan Order of the Ermine, of which il Moro had been named a knight in 1488, *MALO MORI QUAM FOEDARI* (better to die than to be sullied). Cecilia's portrait commemorates this honor as much as their dishonorable liaison. In the portrait, therefore, the ermine refers not only to the name Gallerani but also to her beloved, and the heraldic pose of the beast confirms this association of ideas. But the chaste sentiment of the knightly motto is contradicted by the animal's phallic appearance and by Cecilia's intense expression, which eroticize her image. Embracing the ermine, Cecilia embraces her beloved.

Cecilia Gallerani is the one portrait by Leonardo that Isabella certainly knew before commissioning her own portrait by him in 1500 (Fig. 22). Whether Isabella's commission implies that she preferred Leonardo's manner of portraiture to Bellini's, as scholars have argued, is moot; and she remained keenly



22 Leonardo da Vinci. *Isabella d'Este*. Black chalk and sanguine cartoon. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

interested in obtaining works by the Venetian. While Bellini proved elusive, however, Leonardo willingly went to Isabella's court, or rather was brought there by momentous events. In October 1499 the French had occupied Milan, and the Sforza were expelled. Although Leonardo was later to enter the service of French allies and eventually of the French king, at that date, perhaps sensing that he was too closely associated with the vanquished duke, Leonardo sought patronage elsewhere. Traveling with the mathematician Luca Pacioli, in December 1499 Leonardo left Milan for Venice, stopping at Mantua en route. Leonardo's *Isabella d'Este* never advanced beyond the cartoon which Leonardo executed during the three months (or less) of his residence in Mantua, from December 1499 or January 1500 until March 1500, when he arrived in Venice.⁵⁵ Whatever Isabella may have thought about Cecilia's portrait, she rejected anything similar when it came to Leonardo's interpretation of herself. Leonardo's *Isabella* can be understood in a sense not only as an "anti-Cecilia," but as an anti-Leonardo portrait. The *Cecilia* is a narrative portrait in which the subject turns to respond, not to the observer, whom she ignores, but to someone else, not seen by us – that is, to Duke Lodovico. In this way, the observer becomes a voyeur, an intruder on this intimate scene. Leonardo helped popularize this conception, which derives from such portraits as Andrea del Verrocchio's marble bust of the *Lady with a Bouquet of Flowers*, dating from c. 1475 (Fig. 23). Here too the hands are included – an inclusion that was still a novelty in Italian portraiture at this date – and the woman's pose suggests a narrative situation in which she seems to respond, either to us or to an unseen interlocutor. This implicit narrative situation – the subject's evident awareness of her being seen, though not necessarily seen by the beholder – distinguishes Verrocchio's *Lady* and Leonardo's *Cecilia* from other female subjects, including Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci*. Ginevra's expression suggests a self-aware and self-absorbed hauteur that is oblivious to any beholder, including the viewer before her image. Her beauty, the back of the panel tells us, adorns her virtue: *Virtutem forma decorat*.⁵⁶ Perhaps her evident unawareness of being seen is intended as an assertion or concomitant of this virtue. Leonardo's portrait encourages us to forget that Ginevra posed for him. We may see her, he tells us, but she is not complicit in our looking. Cecilia is also removed from us emotionally, but now her indifference has an explanation, her only physical and psychological point of reference being her unseen companion.

Isabella would have nothing of the sort for herself, rejecting the frontality of Leonardo's other portraits in favor of a half length profile, self-contained in the psychological and narrative, or rather, non-narrative, sense. The profile makes no reference to another person, offers no acknowledgment of the beholder. Ephemera of movement and of expression of emotions are subjugated to the eternal stasis of posture and visage. Surely it was Isabella who opted for the profile format, given her well-documented control over her image in every medium.

Antithetical to the art of Leonardo, the psychological qualities of the *Isabella d'Este* are characteristic of Bellini's portraiture, exemplified by the *Portrait of*



23 Andrea del Verrocchio. *Lady with a Bouquet of Flowers*. Marble. Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello.

a *Man* ("Pietro Bembo"), painted c. 1500 (Fig. 24).⁵⁷ Bellini's unexpression in portraiture is quite distinct from the emotionalism of some of his sacred characters, for example, the Virgin Mary in the *Pietà* (Fig. 25), c. 1500–05, to cite an example close in date to the portrait.⁵⁸ In this work and others describing the grief of the Virgin Mother and other sacred beings, Bellini shows himself to be a sublime poet of the most profound emotions. Clearly, Bellini's suppression of emotion in portraiture is purposeful. Moreover, this emotional passivity must have been amenable to his subjects, members of the Venetian ruling classes. Indeed, for Venetian patricians and original citizens (*cittadini originari*), the expression of emotion was deemed inappropriate, as they themselves explained and as Bellini's portraits show. (Nor coincidentally, the Bellini themselves were *cittadini originari*.) Public display or revelation of one's feelings is to be avoided: it is for lesser mortals – or sometimes for more exalted beings, as in the *Pietà*. The tranquil social mask of Bellini's portraits is the patrician's true face, or at least the face that he wishes to commemorate (*he* because few Venetian ladies were portrayed). And in Leonardo's portrait, Isabella adopted that mask for herself. Posing for Leonardo, she acted as though she were posing for Bellini, preferring his veil to Leonardo's scrutiny.

25 (facing page) Giovanni Bellini. *Pietà*. Panel. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.

24 Giovanni Bellini. *Portrait of a Man* ("Pietro Bembo"). Panel. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, on loan to London, National Gallery.



It is not difficult to imagine that Isabella may have shown Leonardo some examples of Bellini's portraiture to consult as prototypes for her portrait. But what portraits might she have known by Bellini to place *al paragone* with Leonardo's *Cecilia*? None of Bellini's portraits of women has survived, and his only documented female subject was Pietro Bembo's beloved. This portrait exists only in two laudatory sonnets by Bembo (xix and xx), inspired by Petrarch's two sonnets on the portrait of Laura painted by Simone Martini: "O my image, celestial and pure," and "Are these those beautiful eyes in which, gazing with no defense to make, I lose myself?"⁵⁹

The Petrarchan derivation of Bembo's sonnets on Bellini's portrait was recognized by Vasari, who cited Petrarch's sonnet in discussing the portrait of Bembo's *innamorata*. Certainly Bembo was profoundly knowledgeable about Petrarch, publishing an edition of Petrarch's poems with Aldus Manutius in Venice in 1501. The first edition of the *Rime* by Bembo himself was not published until 1530 (Venice, da Sabbio), but it includes poems written many years earlier – among them, these two sonnets. As for the portrait, while there is no certainty regarding its date or the identity of this unnamed beloved, circumstantial evidence (including Bembo's *Carteggio d'amore*) suggests that she was Maria Savorgnan, the object of Bembo's desire during his residence in Venice in 1500 and 1501, that is, precisely when he was completing his edition of Petrarch, the inspiration for his own sonnets and for his commission of the portrait by Bellini.⁶⁰ Given that the portrait of Bembo's beloved pre-existed the



sonnets that it inspired, Bellini must have completed the work by 1501. If it were painted as early as 1498, it is tempting to imagine, though impossible to prove, that Isabella compared this portrait with Leonardo's *Cecilia Gallerani*, also the portrait of a beloved mistress.

Whether Isabella knew Bellini's portrait, most of Bembo's contemporaries could know the work (his very private possession) only through his sonnets. These verses invoke the venerable *paragone* between painting and poetry in the depiction of beauty, with a nod toward the *paragone* of painting and sculpture: Bellini's "celestial and pure image" is like the one Bembo has "sculpted in my heart with greater care." The poems leave almost no cliché unturned. But literary tradition aside, the portrait existed, and other painters and patrons surely knew of it. What did it look like?

That it was beautiful goes without saying: the beautiful women of such works as Bellini's *Madonna and Child with Two Female Saints*, painted at the end of the fifteenth century, bear testimony to the fact (Fig. 26).⁶¹ Like most of Bellini's works, the portrait was painted on panel, a fact confirmed by Bembo's wording of sonnet xix in the first edition of the *Rime* (though not the second): "a mere picture on wood." In sonnet xx, Bembo praises his mistress's beautiful eyes, her beautiful lashes, her face itself ("O volto"), and her brow. These phrases may be clues, and not merely an itemization of the qualities shared by all Petrarchan beauties. Bembo's references to his beloved's visage, eyes, and



eyelashes suggest that Bellini's portrait was frontal or perhaps three-quarter view, indeed, like all his surviving portraits.

Bembo's allusion to his beloved's beautiful hair seems to be another clue about the lost portrait. The implication is that Bellini portrayed her with her hair unbound, suggesting a degree of informality in her image. It seems strange that such a highly praised work should have left no *visual* trace and that it should survive only in the words of its principal viewer. Perhaps Bellini's lost portrait was the mother, so to speak, of all those anonymous beautiful women of early sixteenth-century Venetian art shown with their hair unbound in works by Titian, Palma il Vecchio, and others.⁶² And perhaps Bellini's portrait of Bembo's mistress was also, if not the mother, the godmother of Leonardo's *Isabella*, likewise depicted with her hair unbound. In all her other portraits, including the "fictional" portrait that Titian completed in 1536, Isabella wears the type of elaborate turban that contemporaries recognized as one of her particular fashion statements.⁶³ Admittedly, in her portrait medal by Gian Cristoforo Romano of c. 1493–98, Isabella's hair is uncovered, but it is tied in a kind of pony-tail *all'antica*. Only in Leonardo's portrait of her is Isabella's hair both unbound and without a turban, veil, or other covering. Did Isabella have Bellini's portrait in mind when she posed for Leonardo?

This may seem a tenuous reference to Bellini's lost portrait of Bembo's mistress – an argument that hangs by a hair – but the resemblance becomes stronger when we restore the missing parapet to Leonardo's *Isabella* with the aid of a follower's contemporary copy of the cartoon (Fig. 27). The copy shows that Isabella's arms and her book rest on a ledge, which almost certainly repro-



26 (facing page) Giovanni Bellini. *Madonna and Child with Two Female Saints*. Panel. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.

27 After Leonardo. *Isabella d'Este*. Black chalk. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum.

duces what Leonardo originally represented, though the bottom of the cartoon has been damaged and this part of his composition lost. Isabella's hands are crossed at the waist, with the right index finger pointing toward a closed book, visible only in its pricked contours and more legible in the copy. (The pricking may have been done to enable the making of another drawing of Isabella, which Leonardo is known to have done.⁶⁴) Leonardo used the parapet in one other portrait, the *Belle Ferronière*, close in date to the *Isabella*. In the *Ferronière*, however, he conceals the hands behind the illusionistic ledge. Only in the *Isabella* did Leonardo combine the motifs of hands and parapet. But parapets are *de rigueur* in Bellini's portraits, with the subject's hands concealed behind this ledge (hands appear only in his latest portraits, starting with the *Doge Leonardo Loredan and His Counsellors*, dated 1507 in Berlin, Staatliche Museen). Leonardo's concealment of hands behind the parapet in the *Ferronière* seems a counter-intuitive choice for him, which Daniel Arasse has characterized as "retardataire."⁶⁵ Was this concealment a conscious echo of Bellini's fifteenth-century portraiture? Leonardo included the sitter's hands in other portraits, including the *Cecilia Gallerani* and the *Ginevra de' Benzi* in its original state, exploiting the expressive power of gesture, as he himself explained (echoing Leon Battista Alberti), in order to illustrate movements of the soul in movements of the body. Indeed, Cecilia's hands express perhaps too much of her soul for propriety's sake.

Apparently preferring Leonardo's portraiture to Bellini's, Isabella commissioned the kind of portrait associated more with the Venetian master than with the Florentine. She rejected the psychological revelation and narrative

conception of Leonardo's *Cecilia Gallerani*, in which the subject "turns and reacts" to the beholder.⁶⁶ Leonardo's *Isabella*, on the contrary, turns and ignores the beholder. Perhaps this requirement did not sit well with Leonardo and may explain why he did not finish her portrait (though he seems never to have needed an excuse not to complete a commission). If the psychological conception of Leonardo's *Isabella* and some aspects of its composition may fairly be called Bellinesque, one conservative element that is *not* Bellinesque is the profile, arguably the portrait's most retardataire feature.

But *why* the profile? And especially why a profile portrait by Leonardo? As Isabella herself recognized, one of Leonardo's great achievements was the expression of emotion, which is precisely what a profile inhibits, if it does not prohibit it altogether. In March 1501, in a letter quoted above, while waiting for her portrait or even a copy of the cartoon that Leonardo had taken to Venice, Isabella asked her agent to commission a painting for her Studiolo, and if that did not appeal to Leonardo, she hoped he might be persuaded to do a "sweet" Madonna. Three years later, writing to Leonardo himself in Florence on 14 May 1504, she reminded him of her longstanding hope to have something "by your hand" and recalled how he had promised to do her portrait having made the cartoon. "But because this would be almost impossible" — given his other commitments, he would not be able to go to Mantua — "we pray that desiring to satisfy the obligation of faith that you have with us that you wish to convert our portrait into another figure, which would be even more welcome, that is, to make a young Christ of about twelve years old, which would be the age he was when he disputed in the Temple, and made with that sweetness and suaveness (*dulcezza et suavità*) of expressions that you have for your particular art *par excellence*."⁶⁷ She reiterated her request in another letter to Leonardo, dated 31 October of that year.⁶⁸ Admiring this psychological quality in his work and indeed soliciting it, why was Isabella willing to subordinate expression in a profile? The profile was still being used in portrait medals, including Isabella's by Gian Cristoforo Romano, but had been abandoned in painted portraiture some twenty or twenty-five years before. Her choice of the profile must have seemed *passé* in 1500. Perhaps Isabella chose the format precisely because it mitigates or suppresses the expression of emotion, but were this her only aim, certainly Leonardo was capable of achieving it in a frontal portrait, as indeed was Bellini. Although Leonardo made numerous drawings of heads in profile, however, none of his painted portraits uses the format. Similarly, none of Bellini's surviving portraits is a profile, and neither was his portrait of Bembo's mistress, if the wording of the sonnets may be taken as descriptive. Simone's portrait of Laura, on the contrary, *must* have been a profile, like other fourteenth-century portraits. Bembo's poems about the portrait of his beloved specifically evoke the Petrarchan commission, but there is no reason to think that Bellini's painting referred to its *visual* model (presumably already lost). The relation to Simone's work is indirect and literary, and perhaps even extraneous to Bellini's conception, applied *ex post facto* by Bembo. Arguably most if not all Renaissance pictures of beautiful women may

be considered Petrarchan to a greater or lesser degree. Perhaps Leonardo and Isabella intended her profile portrait to recall the great Petrarchan prototype in a more direct and visual manner?

Petrarchan or not, from Isabella's point of view, the profile had the advantage of preserving her from precisely the kind of psychological inquest in which Leonardo excelled. (Later, Isabella achieved this self-protective desideratum by refusing to pose for her portraits, engineering portraits that conceal — sometimes by adopting another persona, as in Titian's *Isabella*, painted in her absence.) That Isabella would wish to evade Leonardo's scrutiny is suggested by her behavior a few years earlier in relation to yet another portrait commission. She had posed for Mantegna in early 1493, and had found the portrait unsatisfactory, claiming that it did not resemble her at all, whereas surviving portraits by him suggest that it probably resembled her all too well. In any case, Isabella had then turned to Giovanni Santi.⁶⁹ Although Santi's portrait is lost, surviving works suggest that the face must have been rather bland, quite unlike Mantegna's precise visages. Of course Bellini is not bland — but he does shield his subjects, whereas Leonardo makes them accessible, perhaps even vulnerable. And Isabella did not want vulnerability for her self-image.

The circumstances of the commission may seem extraordinary; its determination by a contest without the active cooperation of the contestants. But Isabella's machinations regarding her portrait by Leonardo were not so different from what other patrons were doing and thinking. The difference was more a matter of degree, involving an exceptionally controlling and knowledgeable patron and two erstwhile rivals who were also two of the greatest painters of their time. Whatever considerations motivated Isabella, however, the matter was decided once she had Leonardo in hand in Mantua. As she posed for Leonardo, perhaps she showed him a portrait or portraits by Bellini or perhaps described them to him. For his part, Leonardo was more amenable to such a confrontation than Bellini may have been.

Leonardo's letter of introduction to Lodovico documents the artist's competitiveness — he is "*al paragone di*" every other master in various arenas. In one of his notebooks, he advised painters to practice drawing in company with others for two explicitly agonistic reasons: "first [...] you will be ashamed to be counted among draughtsmen if your work is inadequate, and this disgrace must motivate you to profitable study. Secondly a healthy envy will stimulate you to become one of those who are more praised than yourself, for the praises of others will spur you on."⁷⁰ (*Unhealthy* envy, however, leads to infamy and cannot "*stand in paragone*," according to a notation on a drawing Leonardo made about 1494.⁷¹) And in 1498, while Isabella was orchestrating her confrontation of Leonardo's *Cecilia Gallerani* and Bellini's portraiture, Leonardo was participating in a *paragone* debate at the Sforza court in Milan. Such debates on various subjects — the favored theme was love — were a popular form of courtly entertainment. Claire Farago cites the example of a week-long poetry contest at the Sforza court in 1423 involving the recitation of eclogues on love; and Castiglione's protagonists engaged in a disputation on the *paragone* of painting and sculpture, reiterating many of Leonardo's ideas.⁷²

Their fictional exchange may echo the tone and content of the actual debate at the Sforza court in 1498. With Duke Lodovico in attendance, Leonardo discoursed on various matters with theologians, men of science, and other artists.⁷³ These kinds of intellectual sparring matches are ultimately descended from the Greek *agones*, including competitions in the recitation of poetry, such as that won by Hesiod, and also musical contests and painting competitions, as well as political, philosophical, and other rivalries.⁷⁴ The ancients provided numerous examples of competitions among artists, but the agon between Apelles and Protogenes, recounted by Pliny among others – including Ghiberti – became the archetype for such battles of wit and skill.⁷⁵

Whether Isabella had such venerable precedents in mind when she set out to compare portraits by Leonardo and Bellini, or whether her interests were entirely pragmatic – who should paint her next portrait, and in what manner? – Leonardo must have been aware of her borrowing his work to compare with the Venetian's. The warmth with which Cecilia refers to Leonardo in her reply to Isabella suggests that they were on friendly terms. Do not blame Leonardo, Cecilia writes, if the portrait no longer looks like me, some twelve years after it was painted. One does not find anyone equal to him (*non se ne truova allini in parol*).⁷⁶ But even had Leonardo been ignorant of the contest staged by Isabella between his portraiture and Bellini's, the fact remains that the *Isabella* evokes Bellini in certain regards. Moreover, Bellinesque elements in the slightly earlier *Belle Ferronière* suggest that Leonardo was confronting his rival even before Isabella staged her competition.

Leonardo's awareness of Bellini's work need not depend on a possible visit to Venice before his documented sojourn there in spring 1500: Bellini's portraits circulated. In any case, an earlier visit to Venice is likely, given Verrocchio's residence there from 1482 until his death in 1488, and the presence of several of Leonardo's former companions from Verrocchio's shop who remained to complete the *Colleoni*, unveiled on 21 March 1496.⁷⁷ Leonardo cannot have been indifferent to the production of this great equestrian monument while he continued to struggle with his own Sforza monument in another paragonistic confrontation with past and present masters.

Did Leonardo meet Bellini? An encounter seems likely, given what is known of Bellini's openness to at least two other foreign visitors, Dürer and – more to the point – the sculptor Cristoforo Solari, a colleague of Leonardo in Milan.⁷⁸ Added to this coincidental evidence is the certainty that Bellini and Leonardo knew of each other and likely also knew of Isabella's *paragone* of their portraits. Leonardo had the *Isabella* cartoon with him in Venice. Characteristically generous about showing his work to others, including his drawings, Leonardo might well have shown this one to Bellini. Indeed, Leonardo's displaying the cartoon in Venice is mentioned by at least one contemporary, Lorenzo da Pavia.⁷⁹ It is easy to imagine that Bellini would have gone to see it. And possibly Leonardo also had some contact with Giorgione, who is described as having debated with the sculptors who had worked on the *Colleoni*, some or all of whom Leonardo had known from his years in Verrocchio's shop.⁸⁰

The disputation concerned the relative merits of painting and sculpture. Unless the Verrocchio *équipe* remained in Venice long after the completion of the *Colleoni* in 1496, the debate must have taken place in that year if not earlier. But not very much earlier: Giorgione was born around 1476, and even if precocious, was not likely before age twenty or so to have been both sophisticated enough to engage in such discussions and mature enough as an artist to produce the winning (visual) argument.⁸¹ Giorgione's painted riposte to the Florentine sculptors is described as *Saint George in Armor* by the Venetian Paolo Pino, as a male nude by the Tuscan Vasari. Whatever the subject, some historians have doubted the existence of Giorgione's *paragone*; they suspect that the lost work may have been a fiction perhaps invented by Pino (and varied by Vasari) to illustrate his argument about the superiority of painting over sculpture.⁸²

Assuming for the sake of argument that Giorgione's painting existed, was the subject a nude, as Vasari wrote, or Saint George, as Pino claimed? Pino's description of Giorgione's subject as the painter's onomastic saint may be seen as confirmation of the painting's existence precisely because it is so wonderfully apposite: defending his art, Giorgione is defending himself. "I will silence those who seek to defend sculpture," boasts Lauro, Pino's Venetian interlocutor,

just as they were confounded with different means by Giorgione da Castelfranco, our most celebrated painter, no less worthy of honor than the ancients. To the perpetual confusion of sculptors, he painted a picture of an armed Saint George, standing and leaning on the shaft of a spear, with his feet at the very edge of a limpid and clear pool in which the entire figure was reflected, foreshortened as far as the crown of the head, [and] he had feigned a mirror leaning against a tree trunk, in which the entire figure was reflected from the back and one side. He feigned a second mirror opposite this, in which one saw the entire other side of Saint George, wishing to demonstrate that a painter can make visible an entire figure at a single glance, which a sculptor cannot do, and this work was (as a creation of Giorgione's) perfectly conceived in all the three parts of painting, that is, design, invention and color, *disegno, invenzione, e colore*.⁸³

Vasari considered Giorgione's painted *paragone* so important as to warrant his mentioning it twice in the 1568 edition (though not at all in 1550), describing the subject as a nude, perhaps thinking unconsciously of Michelangelo's preferred subject. In the *Proemio di tutta l'opera*, in the context of a discussion of the *paragone* of painting and sculpture, Vasari explained that

whereas the sculptors make two or three figures together at most from a single block of marble, they [painters] make many of them in one single panel, with those very many and varied views that they [sculptors] say that a single statue has, [painters] compensating with the variety of their poses, foreshortening, and attitudes, for the ability to see the works of sculptors from all around; even as Giorgione da Castelfranco has already done in one

of his pictures, which had a figure turning the shoulders, and having two mirrors, one on each side, and a pool of water at the feet, showing the figure's back in the painting, the front in the pool, and the sides in the mirrors – a thing that sculpture has never been able to do.⁸⁴

Vasari returned to the subject in his *Life of Giorgione*, this time offering a more explicit description of the lost work and explaining its genesis in the context of the painter's debate with Verrocchio's colleagues, "It is said" – words suggesting that the anecdote was a familiar one –

that Giorgione, arguing with several sculptors at the time when Andrea Verrocchio was making his bronze horse [for the *Colleoni*], who held that because sculpture showed in one single figure different poses and views as one moved around it, that for this reason it surpassed painting, which showed only a single view of a figure. Giorgione [. . .] was of the opinion that in a painted narrative one could show, without the need to walk around, but in a single glance, all the kinds of views that one man can make in many gestures, a thing that sculpture cannot do without changing the site and point of view, so that [in painting] there is not one but many points of view. He further proposed that with one single painted figure, he wanted to show the front, the back and the two profiles from the sides. [. . .] And he did it this way. He painted a nude man who turned his shoulders and had in the ground a pool of the most limpid water in which he made the front part by reflection; on one of the sides there was a burnished cuirass that the man had removed, in which was the missing profile, because everything was seen in the polished surface of that armor; on the other side was a mirror, within which was reflected the other side of the nude; which was a thing of the most beautiful whim and caprice, he wishing to demonstrate that in effect painting leads with greater *virtù* and effort, and shows in one single view of the living figure more than does sculpture. Which work was most greatly praised and admired as something ingenious and beautiful.⁸⁵

The reliability of these sixteenth-century literary sources (and Pino in particular) is confirmed indirectly by visual evidence of paintings that seem to have been influenced by Giorgione's lost work. Titian's *Saint George*, datable to c. 1516, may recall the spiraling stance of Giorgione's lost figure, though the reflecting motifs have been abandoned, and with them, the point of the exercise.⁸⁶ Closer to Giorgione's polemical purpose is Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo's *Man in Armor*, possibly a self-portrait (Fig. 28). Pino was Savoldo's devoted follower, and some scholars have suspected that he may have had this portrait or similar work in mind when he recounted the story of Giorgione's *paragone*.⁸⁷ And yet Pino's dedication to his master may suggest precisely the contrary: were Savoldo, and not Giorgione, the painter of the definitive paragonistic work, presumably the author would have said so. In any case, there is of course no pool of water in Savoldo's portrait because his subject is seen in an indoor setting; but Giorgione's two mirrors are at home here, evoking Pino's descrip-



28 Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo. *Man in Armor*. Canvas, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

tion. Savoldo exploited one of these mirrors to display his signature, written on a *cartellino* or fictive label visible only as a reflection in the mirror behind the subject. The *cartellino* is affixed to a wall that we understand to be in front of the man, by implication in the beholder's space, that is, in the real world reflected in the image by virtue of the artist's skill.⁸⁸ The conspicuous foreshortening of the left arm and the forward tilt of the torso, which becomes backward in the mirror reflection, may also derive from the lost Giorgione: both Pino and Vasari allude to foreshortened limbs.

Whatever Giorgione's subject – nude or saint – its meaning, or the anecdote's meaning, was clear for both Pino and Vasari. The painter can represent multiple views of a figure by means of reflections in such surfaces as water, glass, or metal, something the sculptor cannot do. In addition, those views need not all be from the same vantage point: in one of Giorgione's reflections, the figure is foreshortened. Giorgione's choice of mirror and water as reflecting surfaces was not coincidental. The reflecting spring is the mirror's natural counterpart, evoking the pool where Narcissus, beholding himself, invented painting. Pino remembered the myth, and purposefully echoed Alberti's explication of its significance for painting.⁸⁹ Painters, Pino declares, should "become liquid, and resolve themselves, like Narcissus, in the image of his beauty."⁹⁰

A statue can obviously be viewed from front, back, and sides; but the sculptor depends perforce on the beholder's movement around the work. Moreover,

the beholder can see these views only sequentially, not simultaneously, as the painter enables one to do. Indeed, the fact that a statue has these various points of view is no credit to the sculptor: it is a function of the medium itself, as Leonardo explained: "There is no comparison between the innate talent, skill and learning within painting and within sculpture, inasmuch as spatial definition in sculpture arises from the nature of the medium and not from the artifice of the maker."⁹¹ Leonardo's words about the *paragone* of painting and sculpture express Giorione's ideas, or at least the ideas imputed to him by Pino and Vasari. Leonardo's texts may be read as an explication of Giorione's lost painting – or the painting seen as the illustration of Leonardo's texts.

Vasari's account of Giorione's *paragone* is introduced as a report of something he had "heard about," *dicesi*, suggesting that the event was still being discussed some six decades later. If Venetians were still talking, and theorists writing, about Giorione's *paragone* in the mid-sixteenth century, Leonardo probably heard of it when he came to the city in 1499, when it was newer news on the Rialto. In any case, if Leonardo needed encouragement to think more about the *paragone*, he could find it in Venice. And that the *paragone* was already on Leonardo's mind at the end of the century is certain, given his participation in the debate at the Milanese court in 1498, Isabella's portrait contest of the same year, and Leonardo's own writings.

As early as 1492, Leonardo had begun to compile notes for a projected treatise on painting, including a discussion of the *paragone* of the arts. These notes, identified as the *Parte prima, Libro di pittura* in the Codex Vaticanus Urbinas Latinus, can be dated to that time (the latest parts of the manuscript are datable c. 1508–10).⁹² Giorione's exploitation of mirror reflections would have been of particular interest to him, because for Leonardo, painting and mirror are equivalents – or should be. Thus he advised the painter to "be like a mirror which is transformed into as many colours as are placed before it, and, doing this, he will seem to be a second nature."⁹³ Later in the same codex, and also in the Ashburnham manuscript, Leonardo expanded the simile, advising the painter to "take the mirror as your master [...] make your picture [...] look like something from nature seen in a large mirror."⁹⁴ Most of the *Parte prima* of the Vatican codex is concerned, however, with Leonardo's "Paragone," in particular the demonstration of painting's status as a science and the rivalrous comparisons of painting and poetry, painting and sculpture – with painting found to be superior in each case. Painting and poetry may be compared "because poetry puts its subjects [*cose*] into the imagination with letters, and painting represents things that are in reality outside the eye, so that the eye receives the likenesses [*similitudini*] as though they were natural."⁹⁵ Although comparable, however, painting and poetry are not equal: "Painting acts through a more worthy [*degnò*] sense than poetry," sight being more noble than hearing because the eyes are the windows of the soul.

And the painter [...] goes directly to the imitation of those works of nature, [...]. With this [painted imitation], lovers are moved by the likenesses of the

beloved [*cosa amata*] to speak with imitative pictures. With this, people are moved [...] to seek the simulacra of the gods, and not a look at the works of poets which figure the same gods with words. With this, animals are deceived. Once I saw a painting that deceived a dog so that he most joyfully greeted the likeness of his master.⁹⁶

A "painting lacks only the soul" (a variation of the ancient trope that a great likeness lacks only the voice).⁹⁷ And the clincher: "If you claim that painting [is] mute poetry, then the painter could say that poetry [is] blind painting. [...] Place the name of God in writing in a place, and if you set up his figure opposite this, you will see which is the more revered. [...] Take a poet who describes the beauties of a lady to her lover, and take a painter who figures her, you will see where nature will lead the enamoured judge."⁹⁸ Leonardo invokes King Matthias of Hungary to prove the point. The king had been reading a poem in his honor but closed the book when "presented [...] with a portrait of his beloved." When the poet called upon him to continue reading, Matthias responded "Silence, O poet. [...] Give me something I can see and touch and not only hear."⁹⁹

Having trounced poetry, Leonardo turns to the *paragone* of painting and sculpture with even more vehemence and indeed *personal* arguments. It could hardly have been otherwise because, unlike the comparison of painting and poetry, whose rivalrous sisterhood dates from classical antiquity, the *paragone* of painting and sculpture lacked a comparable literary tradition.¹⁰⁰ But Leonardo adapts various sources to this new purpose. "Sculpture is not science but a most mechanical art, because it generates sweat and bodily fatigue in the worker," he declares, referring to stone carving (as opposed to modeling or casting techniques).¹⁰¹ "The only difference I find between painting and sculpture," he continues, hammering home the point,

is that the sculptor conducts his works with greater physical effort than the painter, and the painter conducts his works with greater mental effort. You can prove that this is true because when the sculptor makes his work he consumes the marble [...] by effort of his arm and by percussion, which is a highly mechanical exercise, often accompanied by great amounts of sweat composed of dust and converted into mud, with his face coated and all dusty with marble dust so that he looks like a baker, and covered with minute flakes so that he seems to have been covered with snow; and his house is filthy and full of chips and stone dust. Just the opposite happens to the painter (speaking of excellent sculptors and painters), because the painter sits in front of his work at great ease, well dressed, and wielding the lightest brush with charming colors. His clothing is ornamented according to his pleasure, and his house is filled with charming paintings, and clean, and he is often accompanied by music or readers of varied and beautiful works that are heard with great pleasure without the uproar compounded of hammers and other noises.¹⁰²

The opposing point of view – sculpture is superior to painting – was perhaps best articulated not in any text but in a wax relief representing *Ugolino and his Sons* by Pierino da Vinci, Leonardo's nephew.¹⁰³ But Bronzino, among others, echoed Leonardo's arguments in a letter written for Varchi's *Due lezioni*: "the physical effort of chiseling [...] does not make their [sculptors'] art nobler, but rather it diminishes its dignity, because the more the arts are exercised with manual and physical exertion, the closer they are to the mechanical crafts. [...] But if one means mental effort, the painters say that painting is not only equal but surpasses sculpture by far" – and this from one who, unlike Leonardo, venerated Michelangelo.¹⁰⁴

The physical exertion entailed in sculpture was not its only fault, however, as Leonardo had explained. If a sculptor seeks to defend his art by claiming that once he has cut away the marble, he cannot "add on" as the painter can do, Leonardo would reply that if the sculptor's "art were perfect [...] he would have taken away only what was enough," and nothing more. Besides, the sculptor does not have to cope with shadow and light, "because nature itself generates them in his sculptures. There is nothing [in sculpture] about color, and if the sculptor is moderately concerned with distance or nearness in his work, he will merely adopt linear perspective but not that [aerial perspective] of colors. [...] Therefore, sculpture has less discourse and, consequently, a lesser effort of imagination compared with painting."¹⁰⁵ In other words, "sculpture is not other than what it appears to be."¹⁰⁶ And finally, if a sculptor argues that sculpture is "more eternal" than painting, he should realize that "this permanence is born from the material and not from the artificer." Besides, a painter can achieve comparable longevity by using enamels on metal or terracotta.¹⁰⁷

The discourse may seem puerile, even risible, today. But for Renaissance participants in the debate, the *paragone* of painting and sculpture was very serious indeed, because it concerned the fundamental purpose of art, which is the imitation of nature. And this painting can do better than any other art, according to Leonardo and Giorgione.

The *paragone* was more than theory to Leonardo and his contemporaries: it was real life, bound to competition with other masters. Leonardo had moved to Milan in 1481–82, perhaps in search of a safer haven for his genius after some unknown difficulty in Florence or because of his disappointment at being excluded from the Sistine Chapel. Leonardo brought competition with him, or rather a rivalrous mentality, as his letter of introduction to Duke Lodovico shows. At the end of his Milanese residence, Leonardo and Bellini had confronted each other in a *paragone* by proxy, engineered by Isabella d'Este. Visiting her court in Mantua, Leonardo would have seen her Studiolo while still a work in progress, though with its agonistic conception already implicit if not completely articulated. During his sojourn in Venice, he would have seen works by Bellini, his erstwhile competitor in Isabella's contest, and perhaps met with him and other Venetian masters, including Giorgione. And finally returning to Florence after nearly a quarter of a century's absence, Leonardo was compelled to face another rival, younger and far more confrontational.

II

Protagonist